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MY BEST STORY

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MY BEST STORY



AN ANTHOLOGY OF STORIES
CHOSEN BY
THEIR OWN AUTHORS

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24 RUSSELL SQUARE

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GIFT

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

ALL the stories in the following collection have been specially chosen by their respective Authors to represent their work. Two or three of the Authors represented have demurred a little anxiously to the title given to the collection; but no other could be found, which would convey the principle of selection in a short enough compass. The Publishers trust that any criticism on this count will be directed against themselves, and not upon the Authors who have so kindly contributed to the making of the book.

The Publishers wish to thank the Authors who have permitted their stories to be reprinted in this book; they wish also to make their acknowledgments to Messrs. Cassell and Company, Ltd. for permitting them to reprint Mr. Vachell's story *Plain Jane*, Mr. Chesterton's story *The Five of Swords*, and Mr. Bennett's story, *Death, Fire, and Life*; to Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd. for 'Sapper's' story *The Patch on the Quilt*, and Major A. E. W. Mason's story *The Clock*; and to Messrs. Hutchinson and Company for Sir Max Pemberton's story *The Brain Drug*. They also desire to thank the Editor of *The Grand Magazine* for giving them his kind assistance in the preparation of the book, the general plan of which is based upon a series of stories printed in that periodical.

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BY
MICHAEL ARLEN



THE PRINCE OF THE JEWS

THIS is the tale of the late Rear-Admiral Sir Charles Fasset-Faith, K.C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O. This distinguished torpedo officer was advanced to flag rank only last June, having previously been for two years Commodore of the First Class, commanding the — Fleet. Throughout the war he was attached to the Submarine Service; and for the vigilance and fearlessness of his command, his name came to be much on men's lips. His early death, at the age of forty-five, will be regretted by all who knew him. He never married.

This is also the tale of Julian Raphael, the Jew, and of Manana Cohen.

One summer evening a gentleman emerged from the Celibates' Club in Hamilton Place, and, not instantly descending the few broad steps to the pavement, stood awhile between the two ancient brown columns of the portico. The half of a cigar was restlessly screwed into the corner of his mouth in a manner that consorted quite oddly with his uneager English eye, and, with the gentleman's high carriage, might have reminded a romantic observer of the President of the Suicide Club. His silk hat, however—for he was dressed for the evening—was situated on his head with an exact sobriety which would seem to rebuke the more familiar relations customary between

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desperate gentlemen and their hats; and he appeared, as he stood idly at the head of the broad steps, to be lost in contemplation, say, of that neutral order about which one may almost truthfully answer, on being asked of what one is thinking, 'Nothing'.

The Admiral made thus a notable mark for any passing stranger with a nice eye for distinction. Unusually tall for a sailor, and of very powerful build, his complexion was as though forged—it is the exact word—of the very alchemy of vengeful suns and violent winds; his pale dry eyes, which would always be decidedly the driest things in a maelstrom, in their leisure assumed that kindly absent look which is the pleasant mark of Englishmen who walk in iron upon the sea; while short brown side-whiskers mightily became the authority of Sir Charles's looks.

The hour was about ten o'clock, and the traffic by the corner of Hamilton Place and Piccadilly marched by without hindrance. The din of horns and wheels and engines, charmed as though by the grace of the limpid night, swept by inattentive ears as easily as the echoes of falling water in a distant cavern. The omnibuses to Victoria and to the Marble Arch trumpeted proudly round the corner, where by day they must pant for passage in a heavy block. Limousines and landaulettes shone and passed silently, while the very taxis, in the exaltation of moderate speed, seemed almost to be forgetting their humble places in the hierarchy of the road. Every now and then figures scuttled across the road with anxious jerking movements.

'A fine night!' sighed the commissioner of the Celibates' Club. A lean, lined face he had, and the fragment of a sergeant-major's bitterly resigned smile still as though embedded in the fold of each line. 'A taxi, Sir Charles?'

The Admiral cleared his throat and aimed the remnant of his cigar into the gutter. 'Thanks, Hunt, I think I'll walk. Yes, a fine night.'

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Omnibus after omnibus tore down the small broad slope from Park Lane, which is called Hamilton Place, and galloped gaily across the pleasaunce of Hyde Park Corner.

'They *do* speed up at night!' sighed the commissioner.

'Don't they! But see there, Hunt!' Sir Charles was waving his cane towards the opposite side of the road, towards the corner by the massive Argentine Club. 'See that man?'

The commissioner with the lined face followed the direction of the cane.

'That constable, Sir Charles?'

'No, no! That Jew.'

The commissioner, mistrustful of his ancient eyes, peered through the clear night. He sighed: 'God knows, Sir Charles, there's Jews enough in Mayfair, but I can't see one just there.'

The Admiral thoughtfully took another cigar from his case. 'Never mind, Hunt. Just give me a light, will you?'

But, as he made to walk down Piccadilly, to join in a rubber at his other club in St. James's Street, Sir Charles did not let the dark, lean man on the other side of the road pass out of the corner of his eye. The young Jew crossed the road. Our gentleman walked on, and, once in Piccadilly, walked at a good pace.

The Piccadilly scene was seldom crowded between ten and eleven: cinema theatres, music-halls and play-houses held the world's attention, while the night was not yet deep enough for the dim parade of the world's wreckage. Sir Charles would always, at about this hour, take a little exercise between his clubs in Hamilton Place and St. James's.

He had passed the opening of Half-Moon Street before the young Jew caught up with his shoulder. Sir Charles walked on without concerning himself to look round at the dark, handsome face. Handsome as a black archangel was Julian Raphael, the Jew. Sir Charles vaguely sup-

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posed that the archangels had originally been Jewish, and it was as a black archangel that the looks of Julian Raphael had first impressed him.

It was altogether a too fanciful business for the Admiral's taste; but he had originally let the thing, he'd had to admit often, run away with him.

'Well?' he suddenly smiled over his shoulder.

Julian Raphael did not smile. He said gravely: 'When I first saw you, Sir Charles, I thought you were only a fool. But I am not sure now. You show a resignation towards fate unusual in your sceptical countrymen. It is scepticism that makes men dull, resignation that makes men interesting. It is a dull mind that believes in nothing; it is an interesting mind that expects nothing and waits for the worst. Your waiting shall be rewarded, Sir Charles.'

The Admiral walked on with a grim smile. He was growing used to this—even to this! They passed beneath the bitten walls of what was once Devonshire House.

The young Jew said softly: 'You have a broad back, Sir Charles. It is a fine mark for a well-thrown knife. Have I not always said so!'

Our gentleman swung round on the lean young Jew. A few yards from them a policeman was having a few words with the commissionaire of the Berkeley Restaurant about a car that had been left standing too long by the kerb. It was Julian Raphael who was smiling now.

Sir Charles said sternly: 'Am I to understand that you are trying to frighten me with this ridiculous persecution? And what, Mr. Raphael, is to prevent me from giving you in charge to that policeman? You are, I think, wanted for murder.'

Julian Raphael's queer black eyes seemed to shine with mockery. 'There's nothing in the world to prevent you, Sir Charles, except that any policeman would think you mad for asking him to arrest air. Not, as you suggest, that he wouldn't be pleased to catch the Prince of the Jews in

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the ordinary way. May I offer you a light for that cigar?"

And as Sir Charles lit his cigar from the match held out to him he was not surprised to find himself looking into the ancient eyes of Hunt, the commissionaire, outside his club in Hamilton Place. His walk up Piccadilly, his talk with the young Jew, had taken no longer than it takes to light a cigar. This was the third time within a fortnight that the Admiral had been privileged to see his old enemy, to walk with him and talk with him; and his awakening had each time been to find that not more than a couple of seconds had passed and that he had never moved from his station.

Sir Charles abruptly re-entered the club and, in the smoking-room, addressed himself to his old friend, Hilary Townshend.

'Hilary,' said he, 'I have a tale to tell you. You will listen, please. It is very fanciful, and you will dislike it. I dislike it for the same reason. But I want you, my oldest friend, to know certain facts in case anything happens to me in the course of the next few days—or nights. In my life, as you know, I haven't had many dealings with the grotesque. But the grotesque seems lately to desire the very closest connection with me. It began two years ago when I officiously tried to be of some service to a young Jewess called Manana Cohen. God help me, I thought I was acting for the best.'

There follows the tale told by Sir Charles Fasset-Faith to Mr. Townshend.

About two years ago (said the Admiral), during one of my leaves in London, young Mrs. Harpenden persuaded me to go down with her to a club of some sort she was helping to run in the East End. There were then, and for all I know there are now, a number of pretty young women and quite sound young men doing their best to placate God for the sins of the Victorian fathers by making life in the East End as tolerable as possible. Perhaps they were

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even doing some good; and I didn't mind stretching a point to help young Napier and Venice Harpenden.

The idea was that I should give the young devils a rough lecture on the Navy in general, and the Jutland fight in particular—that kind of thing. So there I stood yapping away, surrounded by a crowd of amiable and attentive young men and women. In a room near by, poor Napier was trying to get away with only one black eye from a hefty young navvy to whom he was supposed to be teaching boxing. Across a counter in a far corner, Venice was handing out cups of perfectly revolting coffee. She had all the bloods at her call that night, had Venice. In one corner George Tarlyon was teaching a crowd Jujitsu, and in another Hugo Cypress was playing draughts with a Boy Scout—it did one good to see him. And there, in the middle of all that, was the old mug roaring away about the silent Navy.

I was just getting settled down and raising laughs with the usual Jack Tar rubbish, when—well, there they were, a pair of them, quite plainly laughing at me. Not *with* me, mark you.

You'll understand that it put me off my stroke. I was annoyed. And the barefaced way that young Jew was laughing at me was infectious, and before long he'd have, I thought, the whole lot laughing at me. However, I did my level best to go on without looking at them, but that wasn't so easy, as they were bang in front of me, three or four rows back. I'd spotted the young man first. He was the one making the jokes and leading the laugh, while the girl only followed suit. Both Jews, obviously, and as handsome as a couple of new coins. Smart, too—the young man too smart by half. You could tell at a glance they had no right in the place, which was for very poor folk, and that they had come in just to guy; at least, that devilish young man had.

He had a thin, dead-white face, a nose that wouldn't

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have looked amiss on a prince of old Babylon, black eyes the size of walnuts, and a smile—I'll tell you about that smile.

Hilary, I've never in my life so wanted to do anything as to put my foot squarely down on that boy's smile. There was the whole dirty world of sneering and sin on that beautiful young Jew's face. I think of it now sometimes, and God knows not without reason. Call me a Dutchman if they don't hate it even down in hell.

The girl wasn't any less beautiful, with her white face, black hair, black eyes, fine slim nose—proud she looked, too, and a proud Jewess can look any two English beauties in the face—but she was better, gentler, *nicer*. You could easily see that from the way, when she did meet my eyes, she did her level best to look serious and not to hear what her companion was whispering into her ear. She didn't particularly want to hurt my feelings, not she, no matter how much her man might want to.

Of course, I could have stopped the lecture and chucked the young man out, but I didn't want to go and have a rough-house the first time I was asked down to little Venice's potty old club.

It will puzzle me all my life—or what's left of it, let's say—to know why that diabolically handsome young Jew took such an instant dislike to me; and why I took such a dislike to him. For that was really at the bottom of all that followed—just black hatred, Hilary, from the first moment our eyes met.

Of course, the fancy young Jew's dislike of me might easily be accounted for by saying he was a Socialist—he'd be something clever, anyhow—and hated me because of all that 'governing-class' rubbish. But can you explain why I, a more or less decent, sane, hard-working, normal sailor, should even trouble to think one way or the other about a comic young Jew-boy just because he had the bad grace to laugh at me when I was trying to entertain him?

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I can't help thinking that the girl had something to do with it even then—the girl and his own shocking smile. I mean, you simply couldn't help fancying that the lovely girl with the gentle eyes was in for a very bad time from that smile.

Decidedly not my business, of course. But the young man went on whispering and laughing so all through my 'rough' lecture, that by the time I had finished there was just one small spot of red on my usually placid mental horizon.

They began to clear out as soon as I had finished. The young Jew's behaviour hadn't, naturally, made my effort go any better, and I was sore. He needed a lesson, that bright young man. I collared him in the passage outside. Of course he and his young lady were much too smart to hurry themselves, and the rest of the lecturees had almost gone. Inside, Venice had given up poisoning her club with coffee and was trying to bring it round with shocking noises from a wireless set.

I can see that passage now. A narrow stairway leading up to God knows where. Just one gas-jet, yellow as a sick Chinaman. The front door wide open to a narrow street like a canal of mud, for it was pelting with rain; you could see sheets of it falling between us and the lamp on the opposite side of the road. A man outside somewhere whistling 'Horsey, keep your tail up', and whistling it well. And the wireless set inside emitting equally shocking American noises.

He was tall, that young Jew. I simply didn't feel I was old enough to be his father. Just that I was up against a bad man. But there wasn't a thing that was mean about him, face, eyes or figure. Clothes awful, of course: one button well in at the waist, bright silk shirt, and a tie the colour of a pillar-box with stripes of *creme caramel*. His young lady's eyes, in that sick light, shone like black jewels. It struck me she was terrified, the way she was

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staring at me. I was sorry for that, it wasn't her terror I wanted. And where I did want it, not a sign.

Then I realised she wasn't terrified for him but for me. Cheek! I had the fancy youth by the shoulder. Tight. He was still laughing at me. 'This lout!' that laugh said. I can hear it now, it's somehow burnt into my mind. There was, confound it, a quite extraordinary authority to that young Jew's eyes. He wasn't used to following anyone, not he.

I said: 'Young man, your manners are very bad. What are you going to do about it?'

Calm, I was. So was he. He didn't answer, but he had given up smiling. He was looking sideways down at my hand on his shoulder. I've never had a pretty hand, but it has been quite useful to me and I've grown attached to it. I can't attempt to describe the disgust and contempt in that boy's look. It sort of said: 'By the bosom of Abraham, what is that filthy thing on my shoulder?'

I said sharply: 'I'm waiting.'

The girl sighed: 'Don't! Don't, Julian!'

As though, you know, he might hit me! Me!

Well, he might. I said: 'Careful, young man!'

The girl whispered almost frantically: 'Let him go, sir! Please. You don't know. . . .'

I comforted her. I said I could take care of myself. She wasn't, I fancy, convinced. The way she looked at a man with those scared black eyes! But our young friend wasn't taking any notice of either of us. He was busy. All this, of course, happened in a few seconds. The Jew had raised his hand, slowly, very slowly, and had caught the wrist of my hand on his shoulder. I felt his fingers round my wrist. Tight.

'Steady, boy!' I said. I'd have to hit him, and I didn't want to do that—at least, I told myself I didn't want to.

The girl suddenly pulled at my arm. Hard. I was pleased to notice she wasn't one of those maidens steeped in scent.

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That young Jew had strong fingers. He simply hadn't spoken one word yet. His conversation was limited to trying to break my wrist. *My* wrist! Then he spoke. He said: 'You swine!' That was enough.

His back was to the road—muddy as a lane in hell. Most appropriate, I thought, and caught him one on the chin so that he was in it flat on his back. The girl screamed. 'All right,' I said. 'All right.' Trying, you know, to comfort the poor kid. She was rushing after her man, but I had my arm like a bar across the door. She stared at me like a frightened animal.

I said: 'Listen to me, girl. You're in bad company.'

'She is now,' a voice said. The young Jew had picked himself up. He looked a mess, fine clothes and all. I thought he would try to rush me, but not he. He just smiled and said: 'I'll make a note of that, Sir Charles Fasset-Faith. Come on, Manana.'

But I wasn't letting 'Manana' go just yet. The poor kid. 'What's his name?' I asked.

She stared at me, trembling. I've never seen such white teeth outside the middle of Africa.

'His name?' I repeated, as I might to a child. 'His name, Manana?'

She whispered: 'Julian Raphael.'

That young Jew's voice hit me on the back of the neck like a knife. 'You'll pay for that, Manana! See if you don't!'

It isn't rhetoric about the knife. It was like a knife. I'll tell you more about knives later.

'Oh!' she sobbed.

'Look here,' I said to the devilish boy, 'if you so much as——'

He laughed. The girl bolted under my arm and joined him. He just laughed. I said: 'Good-night, Manana. Don't let him hurt you.' She didn't seem to dare look at me.

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They went, up that muddy lane. He had her by the arm, and he had her tight. There aren't many lamps in that *beau quartier*, and a few steps took them out of my sight. I heard a scream, and then a sob. That settled Julian Raphael so far as I was concerned. Then another sob—from the back of that nasty darkness. I couldn't, of course, go after them then; it would look too much as though I was bidding for possession of the young Jew's love-lady. But at that moment I made up my mind I'd land that pretty boy some time soon. That scream had made me feel just a trifle sick.

That was personal. Then I was against Julian Raphael impersonally, because I've always been for law and order. Some of us must be, God knows, in this world. And it was against all law and order that young Mr. Julian Raphael—imagine any man having a name like that—should be loose in the world. He was rotten bad, and worse for being so devilish handsome. Crook was too simple a word for Mr. Raphael. One imagined him with women—with this poor soul of a Manana. Life's dirty, I know, but need it be quite so dirty as Julian Raphaels make it?

Of course, Venice and Napier knew nothing about either of them. They must have just drifted in, they said. They had—into my life.

The very next morning I rang up our friend H—— at Scotland Yard and asked him if he knew anything about a Julian Raphael. Oh, didn't he! Had a *dossier* of him as long as my overdraft. H——said: 'The Prince of the Jews, that's Julian Raphael's pet name. Profession: counterfeiter. But we've never yet caught him or his gang.'

The cinema wasn't in it with our fancy young friend. The police had been after him for five years. Once they'd almost got him for knifing a Lascar. Murder right enough, but they'd had to release him for lack of evidence. The Lascar, H—— said, had probably threatened to give away

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a cocaine plant, and Julian Raphael had slit his throat. Suspected of cocaine-smuggling, living on immoral earnings of women, and known to be the finest existing counterfeiter of Bank of England five-pound notes. Charming man, Mr. Julian Raphael.

‘I want to land him,’ I told H——.

‘Thanks very much,’ said he. ‘So do we.’

‘Well, how about that girl of his—Manana something?’

‘Manana Cohen? Catch her giving him away! She adores the beast, and so do they all, those who aren’t terrified of him!’

I said: ‘Well, we’ll see. I want to get that boy. I don’t like him.’

H——’s last words to me were: ‘Now, look here, Charles, don’t go playing the fool down there. I know the East End is nowadays supposed to be as respectable as Kensington, and that the cinema has got it beat hollow for pools of blood; but believe me, a chap is still liable to be punctured in the ribs by a clever boy like Julian Raphael. So be a good fellow and go back to your nice old Navy, which wouldn’t harm anyone.’

H—— was right. I was a fool, certainly. But God drops the folly into the fields and it’s our job to pick up bits of it. It’s not *decent* to go on being wise all one’s life.

Besides, the badness of our young friend was near obsessing me—and, let’s be candid, I wanted some fun! I’ve never been one for dinner-parties, what-nots, and the artless prattle of footlight favourites, and so, thought I, could a man spend his leave more profitably than in landing a snake like Julian Raphael? Whereupon I took myself off down to the East End with my oldest tweeds, a toothbrush, and a growth on my chin.

George Tarlyon came with me. He had scented a row that night, and not God, nor devil, nor man can keep George from putting both his feet into the inside of a row. Besides, he wanted to have a look at Miss Manana Cohen,

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saying he was a connoisseur of Cohens and liked to watch them turning into Colquhouns. I wasn't sorry, for you can't have a better man in a row than George Tarlyon, and he'd make a miser forget he was at the Ritz with his dam-fool remarks. So we took two rooms in Canning Town, E., and very nice rooms they were, over a ham-and-beef shop, and walked from pub to pub watching each other's beard grow and listening for Julian Raphael. At least, I listened and George talked.

You would have naturally thought that the likely place to find that smart young man would be round about what journalists call the 'exclusive hotels and night-clubs of the West End'. Not a bit of it. We soon heard something of Julian Raphael's ways from one tough or another.

Tarlyon's idea of getting information delicately about a man was to threaten to fight anyone who wouldn't give it to him, and we soon collected quite a bit that way. Mr. Raphael was a Socialist, it appeared—remember, I'd guessed he was clever—and hated the rich. He hated the rich so bitterly, in fact, that though he had a pretty fat bank account of his own, he still clung to his old quarters in the East End. But no one knew, or cared to give, the address of his 'old quarters', which were probably various. Tarlyon threatened to fight any number of toughs who didn't 'know' Mr. Raphael's address, but they preferred to fight, and in the end George got tired.

Oh, yes, Julian Raphael was certainly watched by the police, but he was generally somewhere else while the police were watching him. And Miss Manana Cohen was certainly his young lady-love, and she loved him and lived with him, but he wouldn't marry her because of another principle he had, that it was wrong for a man of independent spirit to have a wife of his own. Charming young man, Mr. Raphael. But it appeared he loved Miss Manana very decidedly and discouraged competition. It also appeared that before he had taken up the life of a blood he

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had been a juggler with knives on the music-halls. Knives again. Tarlyon thought that a pretty good joke at the time, but he didn't enjoy it nearly so much later on.

We had been pottering about down there several days, and George was just beginning to think of a nice shave and a bath, when we hit on our first clue. The clue was walking up a grimy side-street by the East India Docks.

'Oh, pretty!' says George. And she certainly was, that Manana Cohen. She hadn't seen us. She was in a hurry.

'We follow,' I said.

'Naturally,' says George. 'A nice girl like that! What do you take me for, a Y.M.C.A.?'

We followed. She walked fast, did Miss Manana. And it was queer how she lit up that grimy God-forsaken street. You might have taken her for a young gentlewoman 'doing' the East End in a hurry, the way she walked. Tall, lithe, well and quietly dressed—Julian Raphael's property! And he'd made her scream with pain.

'Now what?' snapped George.

She'd been about twenty yards ahead of us. Street darkish, deserted, lined with warehouses, and all closed because it was a Saturday afternoon. Suddenly no Manana Cohen. We slipped after her quick as you like. She had dived down a narrow passage between the warehouses. We were just in time to see the tail of her skirt whisking through a door in the wall a few yards up—and just in time to cut in after her.

'Oh!' she gasped. We must have looked a couple of cut-throats. And it was dark in there. I was panting—nothing like a sailor's life for keeping you thoroughly out of training, unless it's a soldier's. But George was all there, being a good dancer.

'Miss Cohen, I believe?' he asks. All in whispers. She staring at us. 'I'm so glad to meet you, Miss Cohen. I've been collecting Cohens for years!'

She just stared at us. She was tall, as women go, but we

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simply towered over the poor child. Then she recognised me and went as red as a carnation. I couldn't think why. George said comfortingly: 'There, there!' Then she panted all in a jumble: 'I'm sorry I was rude to you the other night. Really I am. Please go away now, please.'

'I'm afraid we can't do that,' I whispered. 'We want—'

George, with his foot gently shut the door behind us. We were in the passage of the house, or whatever it was. It was pitch-dark. I lit a match.

'But what is it? What do you want?' the girl moaned.

'You may well ask,' chuckled George, the idiot, at the top of his voice.

'Oh!' she caught her breath. That gave the show away all right. Julian Raphael was at home, whatever home was. The match went out. And the lights went on, snap! Julian Raphael stood at the end of the passage, pointing a revolver. George said: 'Come, come!'

'Come here!' says the Jew to the girl.

'No, you don't!' said George, hauling her to him by the arm.

Julian Raphael smiled in that way he had. 'If you don't let her go at once,' he says, 'I shoot.'

'You what!' I said.

Tarlyon laughed. You can hear him. 'Don't,' he says, 'be a damn fool all your life, but stand at attention when you speak to my friend here, because he's a knight. And put that gun away, else I'll come and hit you.'

I couldn't help laughing. The young Jew looked so surprised. He'd never before been talked to just in that way, and it bothered him; he was used to doing the laughing and being taken seriously.

But I had laughed too soon. There was a whizz by my ear, a thud on the door behind me, and a knife an inch deep on the panel. The surprise had given Manana a chance to slip away. She was by the Jew now at the end of the passage. There wasn't light enough to make out what

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was behind them, a stairway up or a stairway down: down, I guessed, into the bowels of the earth. Julian Raphael was smiling, I'll say it was well thrown, that knife.

Tarlyon was livid. 'By God!' he whispered. 'Threw a knife at us! We *are* having a nice week-end. At him, Charles.'

I held him back. What was the use? A little child could have led us at knife-throwing, and there wasn't a drop of childishness in that fancy Jew. He said, with that infernal sneer of his:

'Gentlemen, I merely wanted to show you what to expect if you were to advance another step. I wouldn't kill you—not yet. One of you, yes. But it would cause comment, the disappearance of two fools. However, I might slice bits off your ears. Further, this is my house. Are you not intruding? Gentlemen, you may go.'

And, you know, we did. What the devil else was there to do? If Tarlyon with his infernal chuckling hadn't roused the man out of his lair, we might have taken him by surprise, and learnt something of the whereabouts of that counterfeiting business. But as it was, 'go' was us. And the way Tarlyon swore when we were outside made me glad it was Saturday afternoon and the warehouses were closed, else he might have corrupted the poor workmen.

'What do we do now?' he asked at last. 'Lump it?'

'Well, at any rate, we know his address now.'

'Address be blowed! That's not an address, Charles, but what Argentines call a *pied-à-terre*. I'll bet our smart friend doesn't wear silk pyjamas in that hole—and by heaven, there you are!'

He made me jump. I hadn't, didn't, see anything. I thought it was another knife.

'Never mind,' snapped George. 'Too late now. Come on, man; don't stare so!'

We walked on. After reaching daylight from that pas-

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sage between the warehouses we had turned to the left, walked on a hundred yards or so by the front of the warehouses, then to the left again. This, running parallel to the passage, was a row of quite respectable-looking houses all stuck together, as quite respectable-looking houses should do in these times. There are streets and streets of them down there, and I'm told white women sometimes marry Chinamen just for the pleasure of living in them. But white women will do anything. We had come to the end of a block, when Tarlyon set up that howl and then shut me up.

'What the deuce!' I said again.

George said, walking on: 'Jew-boy has made one mistake. Naughty Jew-boy. Now have a look at that house we passed. Don't stare as though you were an American looking at the Prince of Wales. Casually. The corner one.'

I turned and looked, casually. It was a house like another, and I said so. George asked me how far I thought it was from the passage in which I had nearly fielded Raphael's knife with my ear. I said it must be a good way; two hundred yards at least. There was a whole block of warehouses and a row of houses in between.

'Quite,' said George. We walked on. 'Then how did Mr. Raphael get there so quick? Not by the road. I just saw a piece of his charming face round the curtain of one of the windows. His one mistake, to have let me see him. There must be an underground passage about two hundred yards long between his warehouse address and his residence. You'll bet the police have never spotted it yet, and I only spotted it because he was so eager to see us well away. I don't think he likes us, Charles. But I'd be pleased to know who is supposed to be living in that house. And I'd take a bet that there's a nice counterfeiting matinée going on this very moment somewhere between that house and that warehouse-passage. Now you say something.'

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'The point is, George, do you think he saw you spot him?'

George chuckled. 'There's always a snag. Trust the God of the Jews to lay a snag for poor Gentiles. But I don't know. He mayn't have seen that I got him. But we will have to act as if he had. Get him quick, else he'll be in the air. What's the time now? Nearly eight. We'll get back to civilisation, try and catch H—at his home address, come down here to-night and surround the place. Fun. Hurrah!'

I said: 'Look here, George——'

He looked at me sharply. 'I know what you are going to say, Charles. Don't say it. You're old enough to know better.'

But I stuck to my point. We must let H—— know at once, yes. Post men at the warehouse entrance and the house entrance, certainly. Catch Julian Raphael and his friends, decidedly. But we must give Manana Cohen another chance. She was only a kid—twenty-one or two at most.

George said: 'Charles, don't be a silly old man. She is probably as bad as any of them. You can't tell. Girls don't live a life like that unless they want to.'

I knew he was wrong—I just knew it—so I didn't argue about it, but stuck to my point. The girl must be got out of the way before the place was raided. If the police found her there, she would be jailed—perhaps for years. I simply wouldn't have it. The girl was at the beginning of her life. To jail her now would be to ruin her for all her life.

George, of course, didn't need to be convinced. He was only leading me on. George wouldn't have put the police on a girl for trying to murder him—although he and Ralph Trevor did once apply to Scotland Yard for a warrant for attempted murder against Lady Surplice on the ground that she had bored them to death at a luncheon party.

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But I was right about Manana Cohen—good God, don't I know I was right! And I'm glad I sort of paid a tribute in advance to the memory of that gentle girl. This had been her life, was her life, these dreary streets, these foul alleys. Julian Raphael had found her, dazzled her, seduced her, bullied her, broken her. What chance had the girl, ever? She was timorous, you could see. A timid girl. No matter how kindly you talked to her, she stared at you like a rabbit at a stoat. Life was the stoat to Manana Cohen—life and her lover. Who knows what the girl hadn't already suffered in her small life, what hell! Maybe she had loved Julian Raphael, maybe she loved him now. That wasn't against her. Saints love cads. It's the only way you can know a saint, mostly. Some of the nicest women George and I knew had been divorced for blackguards.

Well, if Manana loved Raphael she would be punished enough by seeing him go to prison for a long stretch. One might find her a job on the stage, with her looks and figure. Good Lord! The way that girl looked at you when you so much as opened your mouth, her black eyes shivering as though her heart was hurt!

We found a taxi in the Whitechapel Road. To civilisation. George was quiet. I wondered if he thought I was in love with the girl. Me, at my age! No, I didn't think I was in love. One doesn't go about falling in love with people. But I often find myself thinking of Manana Cohen. It's merely that she appealed to my imagination then, and does now, more than any woman I have ever seen, from Shanghai to the Embassy Club. That Manana with her hurt, gentle eyes. I shouldn't be sorry to see her again.

As we rattled through Cheapside—deserted on a Saturday afternoon—Tarlyon said: 'We will have to think of a way of getting the girl out of the place beforehand. But how? If we warn her she will naturally pass the glad news on to her man. Naturally.'

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Naturally, I agreed. She wouldn't be herself if she went back on her man. I said I would think of a way as I bathed and dressed for dinner. As George dropped me at my flat, he said: 'Let's say dinner in an hour's time at White's. Meanwhile I'll ring up H——. Maybe he will dine with us. I suppose it will be about midnight before we get down there with his men. I'm not going to have knives chucked at me on an empty stomach—for I'll not be left out of this, not for all the knives in Christendom and Jewry. This is a real treasure-hunt as compared to chasing poppycock with children round Regent's Park and chicken-food with flappers up Piccadilly. I said midnight, Charles, to give you a chance of getting Manana clear away. 'Bye.'

But Fate wouldn't be bullied by Tarlyon. Fate had ideas of her own. Or is Fate a he? No, it would be a woman, for she hates slim women.

I hadn't finished glancing at my letters, while my bath was filling, when my man announced a young lady.

'A young what!' I said.

He was surprised too. I went into the sitting-room. Manana Cohen was by the open door, as though she was afraid to come right in.

I said: 'Thank heaven, you've come!' Extraordinary thing to say, but I said it. She tried to smile. All scared eyes. I thought she was going to faint, tried to make her sit down, fussed about. I'm trying to tell you I was shy. So was she, shy as a virgin.

'I'm frightened,' she said, as though that would be news for me. Then it all came out in that jumbled way of hers. She had given Raphael the slip; found my address in the telephone book; had come to me to warn me.

'To warn me!' I gasped. The cheek of these young people! Here were we and all Scotland Yard after them—and they were warning me!

'Yes. Listen.' Then she stopped. Suddenly, she blushed crimson.

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I said: 'Now, Manana, what is it? What on earth is there to blush about?'

She tried not to stammer. 'I can't help it. Julian's after you. He's out to kill. He hates you once and he hates you twice because he thinks I'm in love with you. I don't know why. He's just mad jealous. I know Julian. And they'll never catch him. Never. The fool police! I just thought I'd warn you. Go away, please go away—out of London. I feel if you die it will be my fault. He'll throw you if you don't go away. I know Julian. You'll be walking up Piccadilly one evening, this evening perhaps. Suddenly—swish—knife in your back. No one will know who threw it in the crowd. He could throw it from the top of a 'bus and no one notice. He never misses.'

I said: 'So, Manana, he thinks you love me. Why does he think that?'

She wasn't blushing now. It was as though there was no blood left in her; white face, eyes ashine like black silver. She was quite calm. She had never moved from the open door. Her eyes wouldn't meet mine. She just said: 'Now I've warned you, I must go back. He will miss me. I'm glad I warned you. I think you must be a good man. Good-bye. But go away, please go away at once. Good-bye.'

I couldn't stop her by touching her, else she would have got scared. I just told her not to go back East. We were going to raid Julian Raphael's place that night. I said: 'You came to warn me. But I was just coming to warn you. My friend and I don't want you to go to prison, Manana. You had better stay away from there for the present. I can find you somewhere to stay to-night, if you like.'

She opened her eyes very wide, but all she said was: 'I must go back at once.'

'But——' I began.

She said: 'You don't understand. I came to warn you

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because you are a good man. You are, aren't you? I'm sorry I was led into laughing at you that night. He pinched my arm when I didn't laugh. But I must stand by Julian. He is my man, good or bad. He has been kind to me in his way; he loves me in his way. I must go back to him at once. If you make me promise not to tell him about the police, I won't. I won't tell him, anyway, I think. He must go to prison. It is time, because he will do more murders. I hate murders. But I will go with him to prison. You see, that will make it all right between Julian and me. Good-bye.'

It was good-bye. I knew it was no use arguing. With some women one doesn't know when it's any good or not, with a few one does. They're the ones who count. I could hold her up by force, of course—for her own good. Dear God, the lies we can tell ourselves! For that would have been a lie. If I held her by force from going back to Julian Raphael it would be for selfish reasons. She must do as she thought right. Everyone must always, in spite of God and man.

I'm glad I have never married; I would have made a mess of it, just by always seeing my wife's point of view.

I saw Manana downstairs to the door. I opened the door. Rain was making night of what should have been twilight. We stood close in the open doorway. I said: 'Perhaps they will let you off. I will do my best. Come to me for help later on. Good-bye, Manana. Thank you.'

She smiled. The first and last smile I ever saw light that face. 'I must never see you again,' she said. And then the laughter of Julian Raphael tore the smile from her face.

My rooms, as you know, are in Curzon Street, at the rather grubby, poor man's end where Curzon Street, as though deprived of the residential support of the noble family of that name, slopes helplessly down to a slit in a grey wall called Lansdowne Passage. When it is dark in London it is darker in Lansdowne Passage. It leads, between Lansdowne House and the wreck of Devonshire

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House, to Berkeley Street. There is a vertical iron bar up the middle of each opening, which was originally put there to prevent highwaymen making a dash through the Passage to the open country round Knightsbridge. Against that vertical iron bar leant Julian Raphael: fifteen yards away a black, lean shape in the dark twilight.

‘Manana, I followed you!’ he cried. And he laughed.

The girl whispered frantically to me: ‘Get in, get in, get in!’

I said: ‘What?’ like a fool.

She tried to push me inside the doorway. I was looking at her, not at Julian Raphael.

There was a scream: ‘Mind out, Manana!’ Manana jumped in front of me. I held her as she fell backward. She just sighed.

‘Manana!’ the voice screamed again. The knife was up to the hilt in her throat. I think I lost my head for the first time in my life. I made a dash towards the figure in the opening of Lansdowne Passage. He didn’t move. He was sobbing like a baby. Then I changed my mind and rushed back to Manana. She lay still as a cut flower. Her eyelids fluttered once or twice, that’s all. The rain was washing the blood into the gutter. My man had come down and was doing his best. I looked through the twilight at the crumpled black figure against the iron bar.

‘She’s dead, Raphael,’ I called, whispering to my man: ‘Go, get him.’

He did his best, poor devil.

Raphael yelled: ‘Yes, for you! And I’ll never throw but one more knife—if I have to come back from hell to do it!’ and was gone, through Lansdowne Passage. My wretched man hadn’t a chance.

That night and for days there wasn’t a port in England that H—— left unwatched for Julian Raphael. But, as in the story-books, he has never been seen or heard of again. H—— has an idea he is somewhere in the Americas.

It’s not quite true that Julian Raphael has never been

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seen or heard of again. I have seen him and heard him, quite lately—in a sort of way. Of course, it is no more than a trick of imagination. He has probably been more on my mind recently than I had realised. But it's quite definitely unpleasant, the illusion. It gets rather on a man's nerves, this idiotic talk of knives in Piccadilly. Imagination, Hilary, plays us queer, dark tricks, sometimes. It's no good trying to explain them with spirit talk. The mind is a dark place, and we don't know what's in the sky, and that is all there is to it.

That is the tale Sir Charles Fasset-Faith told his friend, Hilary Townshend, one night at the Celibates' Club. Mr. Townshend had listened gravely. A lean, grey man, Mr. Townshend found no aspect of this our life on earth which was not a proper occasion for the exercises of gravity, command of temper and forbearance. He therefore forbore to make any comment on his friend's tale, but merely remarked: 'You ought not to stay in London, Charles. An unhealthy place, at best. Why not come down to Magralt with me to-morrow? Guy de Travest is coming. There's some fishing; not much, and that little is poor, but you can always smoke in peace.'

Sir Charles laughed. 'You talk like Manana! But, anyhow, I am due at Portsmouth the day after to-morrow. No, no, I'll see my time out in London. I've been in most corners of the world, Hilary, and never found romance but in London.'

'H'm,' said Mr. Townshend, thoughtfully. 'You have an odd idea of romance, Charles. Romance! And I don't, as a general rule, believe in apparitions. H'm. Have you rung up H—to tell him of the reappearance of this remarkably unpleasant youth?'

But H—— had laughed Sir Charles to scorn! Was ready, in fact, to lay a pony against Raphael's being within

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a thousand miles of London or England.

‘But you never know,’ added Mr. Townshend, gloomily.

‘Never know what, Hilary?’

‘Where you are,’ said Mr. Townshend, gloomily—‘with Jews.’

It was on the night following this conversation that the Admiral, on emerging from the Celibates’ Club, made an astonishing suggestion to Hunt, the commissionaire. ‘Hunt,’ says Sir Charles, ‘do you mind walking with me just down to the Piccadilly corner? I will know then that I am actually moving and not just standing here and thinking I’m moving. You see my point, Hunt?’

‘Certainly, Sir Charles. I quite understand.’

‘I’m glad someone does!’ sighed our gentleman.

The commissionaire with the lined face had himself, in his youth, been a martyr to insobriety, and could sympathise with the Admiral’s probable condition, while admiring the correct address with which, as became a gentleman of the sea, he bore his infliction.

‘See any Jews about, Hunt?’ the Admiral asked, as they came to the Piccadilly corner.

‘Not definitely, Sir Charles. But a couple of Rolls-Royces have just passed. Good-night, Sir Charles.’

‘Good-night, Hunt.’

Those were the last words the ancient commissionaire was ever to hear from his good friend the Admiral. For as Sir Charles made to cross Piccadilly from Albemarle Street to St. James’s Street he heard that ‘whizz’ behind him. He had been expecting it, but it startled him. He half turned and jumped sideways, colliding with the bonnet of a fast-moving car. There was a terrific din about him as he raised himself to his hands and knees. It deafened him, the din of engines and voices. Many voices seemed to be arguing. Then as he rose to his feet, the din happily receded. There was silence, but the silence of a

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pleasant voice. He walked on to St. James's Street, glad things had been no worse.

Then he saw the face of Julian Raphael. It was just in front of him, smiling. He was beautiful. Behind his shoulder was Manana. She was laughing at Sir Charles's bewilderment. Then as he stared at them they pointed over his shoulder; behind him, in the middle of Piccadilly, there was a great crowd round a large motor-car and a prostrate figure that looked oddly like a dingy travesty of himself.

That is how it was, but still he did not understand. Julian Raphael and Manana laughed at him and each took him by an arm and walked with him down the slope of St. James's Street. There was a valley at the foot, as large as a continent. Manana was still laughing happily.

'Julian died last night in Paris,' she told Sir Charles. 'He was just coming over to London to kill you. Isn't it idiotic? I don't say he loves you now, but he's willing to consider an intelligent friendship. Aren't you, Julian? Death isn't at all what the Salvation Army thinks, Charles. You'll be surprised. You're just yourself, that's all. Funny you have to die before you're allowed to be yourself. Oh, look! Look, Charles! Isn't it beautiful! Charles, let's walk and walk and walk!'

'Here, and me!' cried Julian Raphael.

'Young man,' said the Admiral severely, 'you just stay where you are. I've been waiting a long time for this walk with Manana.'

'I'll follow you. Where are you going to walk to?'

'You can't follow us, Julian,' laughed Manana. 'They won't let you, yet. Naturally, dear, considering how awful you've been. Come on, Charles, come on! We'll walk towards God and back.'

BY
MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES



THE DECREE MADE ABSOLUTE

JAMES TAPSTER was eating his solitary, well-cooked dinner in his comfortable and handsome house, a house situated in one of the half-moon terraces which line the quieter, pleasanter, side of the Regent's Park, and which may almost be said to have private grounds of their own, for each resident enjoys the use of a key to a portion of the park entitled locally 'The Enclosure'.

Very early in his life Mr. Tapster had made up his mind that he would like to live in Cumberland Crescent, and now he was living there; very early in his life he had decided that no one could order a plain yet palatable meal as well as he could himself; and now for some months past Mr. Tapster had given his own orders, each morning, to the cook.

To-night Mr. Tapster had already eaten his grilled sole, and he was about to cut himself off a generous portion of his fillet steak, when he heard the postman's steps hurrying round the Crescent.

He rose with a certain quick deliberateness, and going out into the hall, opened the front door just in time to avoid the rat-tat-tat. Then, the one letter he had expected duly in his hand, he waited till he had sat down again in front of his still empty plate, before he broke the seal and glanced over the typewritten sheet of notepaper.

*Shorters Court,
Throgmorton Street,
November 4th.*

‘Dear James,

In reply to your letter of yesterday’s date, I have been to Bedford Row and seen Greenfield, and he thinks it probable that the Decree will be made Absolute to-day; in that case you will have received a wire before this letter reaches you. It really is time you installed a telephone in your private home.

Your affect. brother,
Wm. A. Tapster.’

In the same handwriting as the signature were added two holograph lines: ‘Glad you have the children home again. Maud will be round to see them soon.’

Mr. Tapster read over once again the body of the letter, and there came upon him an instinctive feeling of intense relief. Then, with a not less instinctive feeling of impatience, his eyes travelled down again to the post-script—‘Maud will be round to see them soon.’

Well, he would see about that! But he did not exclaim, even mentally, as most men feeling as he then felt would have done, ‘I’ll be damned if she will!’ knowing the while that Maud certainly would.

His brother’s letter, though most satisfactory as regarded its main point, put Mr. Tapster out of conceit with the rest of his dinner; so he rang twice and had the table cleared, frowning at the parlour-maid as she hurried through her duties, and yet not daring to rebuke her for having neglected to answer the bell the first time he rang.

After a pause, he rose and turned towards the door—but, no, he could not face the large, cheerless drawing-room upstairs; instead, he sat down by the fire in the dining-room, and set himself to consider his future, and,

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in a more hazy sense, that of his now motherless children.

But very soon, as generally happens to those who devote any time to that least profitable of occupations, Mr. Tapster found that his thoughts drifted aimlessly, not to the future where he would have them be, but to the past—that past which he desired to forget, to obliterate from his memory.

Till rather more than a year ago few men of his age—he had then been sixty-four; he was now nearly sixty-five—enjoyed a pleasanter and, from his own point of view, a better-filled life than James Tapster. How he had scorned the gambler, the spendthrift, the adulterer—in a word, all those whose actions bring about their own inevitable punishment! He had always been self-respecting and conscientious—not a prig, mind you, but inclined rather to the serious, than to the flippant, side of life; and so inclining he had found contentment, and great material prosperity.

Not even in those days to which he was this evening looking back so regretfully had Mr. Tapster always been perfectly content; but now the poor man, sitting alone by his dining-room fire, only remembered what had been good and pleasant in his former state.

He was aware that his brother William, and William's wife, Maud, both thought that even now he had much to be thankful for; his line of business was brisk, scarcely touched by the present unsatisfactory state of trade; his income increasing at a steady rate of progression; and his children exceptionally healthy.

But, alas! now that, in place of a pretty little Mrs. Tapster on whom to spend easily-earned money, his substance was being squandered by a crowd of unmanageable and yet indispensable thieves—for so Mr. Tapster voicelessly described the five servants whose loud talk and laughter were even now floating up from the basement below—he did not feel his financial stability so comfortable a thing as he had once done.

His very children, who should be, as he told himself complainingly, his greatest comfort, had degenerated from two sturdy, well-behaved little boys and a charming baby girl, into three unruly, fretful imps, setting him at defiance, and terrorising their two attendants, who, though carefully chosen by their Aunt Maud, did not manage them as had done the old nurse who had been an ally of the ex-Mrs. Tapster.

Looking back at the whole horrible affair, for so in his own mind Mr. Tapster justly designated the divorce case in which he had figured as the successful petitioner, he wondered uneasily if he had done quite wisely—wisely, that is, for his own repute and comfort.

He knew very well that had it not been for William—or rather for Maud—he would never have found out the dreadful truth. Nay, more; he was dimly aware that but for them, and for their insistence on it as the only proper course open to him, he would never have taken action. All would have been forgiven and forgotten, had not William—and more especially Maud—said he must divorce Flossy, if not for his own sake, ah! what irony! then for that of his children.

Of course he felt grateful to his brother William and to his brother's wife for all they had done for him since that sad time. Still, in the depths of his heart Mr. Tapster felt entitled to blame, and sometimes almost to hate, his kind brother and sister-in-law. To them both—or rather to Maud—he really owed the break-up of his life, for, when all was said and done, it had to be admitted (though Maud did not like him to remind her of it) that Flossy had met the villain while staying with the William Tapsters at Boulogne. Respectable London people should have known better than to take a furnished house at a disreputable French watering-place—a place full of low English!

Sometimes it was only by a great exercise of self-control that he, James Tapster, could refrain from telling Maud

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what he thought of her conduct in this matter, the more so that she never seemed to understand how greatly she—and William—had been to blame.

On one occasion Maud had even said how surprised she had been that James had cared to go away to South America, leaving his pretty young wife alone for as long as three months. Why hadn't she said so at the time, then? Of course he had thought that he could leave Flossy to be looked after and kept out of mischief by Maud—and William. But he had been—in more than one sense, alas!—bitterly deceived.

Still, it's never any use crying over spilt milk, so Mr. Tapster got up from his chair and walked round the room, looking absently, as he did so, at the large Landseer engravings of which he was naturally proud, tho' he knew there were some people who thought them not worth their good and costly frames.

If only he could forget—put out of his mind for ever—the whole affair! Well, perhaps with the Decree being made Absolute would come oblivion.

He sat down again before the fire. Staring at the hot embers he reminded himself that Flossy, wicked, ungrateful Flossy, had disappeared out of his life. This being so, why think of her? The very children had at last left off asking inconvenient questions about their mother——

By the way, would Flossy still be their mother after the Decree had been made Absolute?—so Mr. Tapster now suddenly asked himself. He hesitated, perplexed.

But yes, the Decree being made Absolute would not undo, or even efface, that fact. The more so, though surely here James Tapster showed himself less logical than usual—the more so that Flossy, in spite of what Maud had always said about her, had been a loving and, in her own light-hearted way, a careful mother. But though Flossy would remain the mother of his children—odd that the law hadn't provided for that contingency—she would

soon be absolutely nothing, and less than nothing to him, the father of those children. Mr. Tapster was a great believer in the infallibility of the law, and though he was proud of being so old-fashioned, and of not having moved with what he considered evil times, he subscribed wholeheartedly to the new reading, 'What law has put asunder, let no man join together.'

To-night Mr. Tapster could not help looking back with a certain complacency to his one legal adventure. Nothing could have been better done, or more admirably conducted, than the way the whole matter had been carried through. His brother William, and William's solicitor, Mr. Greenfield, had managed it all so very nicely. True, there had been a few uncomfortable moments in the witness-box, but everyone, including the Judge, had been most kind.

As for his counsel, the leading man who makes a speciality of these sad affairs, not even James Tapster himself could have put his own case in a more delicate and moving fashion. 'A gentleman possessed of considerable fortune,' so had he been justly described, and counsel, without undue insistence on irrelevant detail, had drawn a touching—and a true—picture of Mr. Tapster's one romance, his marriage eight years before to the twenty-year-old daughter of an undischarged bankrupt. Even the petitioner had scarcely seen Flossy's dreadful ingratitude in its true colours till he had heard his counsel's moderate comments on the case.

This evening Mr. Tapster saw Flossy's dreadful ingratitude terribly clearly, and he wondered, not for the first time, how his young wife could have had the heart to break up his happy home?

Why, but for him and his offer of marriage, Flossy Ball—that had been his wife's maiden name—would have had to have earned her own living typewriting in some office. And as she had been very pretty, very 'fetching', she

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would probably have married some good-for-nothing young fellow of her own age lacking the means to support a wife in decent comfort—such a fellow, for instance, as the wretched ‘co.’ in the case. While with Mr. Tapster—why, she had had everything the heart of woman could wish for. A good home, beautiful clothes, and the being waited on hand and foot! A strange choking feeling came into his throat as he thought of how good he had been to Flossy, and how very bad had been her return for that kindness.

But this—this was dreadful! He was actually thinking of her again, and not, as he had meant to do, of himself and his poor motherless children. Time enough to think of Flossy when he had news of her again. If her lover did not marry her—and from what Mr. Greenfield had discovered about him, it was most improbable that he would ever be in a position to do so—she would certainly reappear on the Tapster horizon. Mr. Greenfield said ‘they’ always did. In that case, it had been arranged that William should pay her a weekly allowance. Mr. Tapster, always, as he now reminded himself sadly, ready to do the generous thing, had fixed that allowance at six pounds a week—a sum which had astonished, in fact quite staggered, Mr. Greenfield’s head clerk. A very decent fellow, by the way.

‘Of course, it shall be as you wish, Mr. Tapster, but you should think of the future and of your children. Three hundred a year, free of all tax, is a substantial sum; you may feel it so, sir, as years go on——’

‘That is enough,’ Mr. Tapster had answered, kindly but firmly; ‘you have done your duty in laying that side of the case before me. I have, however, decided on the amount named; should I see reason to alter my mind, our arrangement leaves it open to me at any time to lower the allowance.’

But though this conversation had taken place some months ago, and though Mr. Tapster still held true to his

generous resolve, as yet Flossy had not reappeared.

Mr. Tapster sometimes told himself that if he only knew where she was, what she was doing—whether she was still with that young fellow, for instance—he would think much less about her than he did now. Only last night, when going for a moment into the night nursery—poor Mr. Tapster now only enjoyed his children's company when he had reason to suppose they were asleep—he had had an extraordinary, almost a physical, impression of Flossy's presence; he certainly had felt a faint whiff of her favourite perfume.

Flossy had been fond of scent, and though Maud always said that the use of scent was most unladylike, he, James, did not dislike it.

With sudden soreness Mr. Tapster now recalled the one letter Flossy had written to him just before the actual hearing of the divorce suit.

It had been a wild, oddly-worded appeal to him to take her back, not—as Maud had at once perceived on reading the letter—because she was sorry for the terrible thing she had done, but simply because she was beginning to hanker after her children. Maud had described the letter as shameless and unwomanly in the extreme; and even William, who had never judged his pretty young sister-in-law as severely as his wife had always done, had observed sadly that Flossy seemed quite unaware of the magnitude of her offence against God and man.

Mr. Tapster, who prided himself on his sharp ears, suddenly heard a curious little sound—he knew it for that of the front door being first opened, and then shut again, extremely quietly.

He half rose from his chair by the fire, then sat down again, heavily.

By Maud's advice he always locked the area gate himself, when he came home each evening. But how foolish of

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Maud—such a sensible woman, too—to think that servants and their evil ways could be circumvented so easily! Of course, the maids went in and out by the front door in the evening, and the policeman—a most respectable officer standing at point duty a few yards lower down the road—must be well aware of their disgraceful ‘goings on’.

For the first two or three months of his widowhood (how else could he term his present peculiar wifeless condition?) there had been a constant coming and going of servants, first chosen, and then dismissed, by Maud. At last she had suggested that her brother-in-law should engage a lady housekeeper, and the luckless James Tapster had even interviewed several applicants for the post after they had been chosen—sifted out, as it were—by Maud. Unfortunately they had all been each more or less of his own age; and plain—very plain. He, naturally enough, would have preferred to see something young and pretty about him again.

It was over this housekeeper question that he had at last escaped from Maud’s domestic thralldom; for his sister-in-law, offended by his rejection of each of her candidates, had declared that she would take no more trouble about his household affairs. Nay, more, she had reminded him with a smile, which she had honestly tried to make pleasant, that there is, after all, no fool like an old fool—about women! This insinuation had made Mr. Tapster very angry; and, straightway, he had engaged a respectable cook-housekeeper. Although he had very soon become aware that the woman was feathering her own nest—James Tapster, as you will have divined ere now, was fond of good workaday phrases—yet she had a pleasant, respectful manner, and kept rough order among the younger servants.

Mr. Tapster’s sister-in-law only now interfered where his children were concerned. Never having been herself a mother, she had, of course, been able to form a clear and

unprejudiced judgment as to how children, and especially as to how little boys, should be physically and mentally trained.

As yet, however, Maud had not been very successful with her two nephews and still baby niece, but this was doubtless owing to the fact that there had been something gravely amiss with each of the five nurses who had been successively engaged by her during the last year.

The elder of Mr. Tapster's sons was six and the second four; the youngest child, a little girl named, unfortunately, Flora, after her mother, was not quite three. There had been a fourth, Flossy's second baby, also a girl, who had only lived one day. All this being so, was it not strange that a young matron who had led, for some four years out of the eight years her married life had lasted, so necessarily domestic an existence as had fallen to the lot of Flossy, should have been led astray by the meretricious allurements of unlawful passion?—Maud's striking thought and phrase this.

And yet Flossy, in spite of her frivolity, her frequent goings out with people of whom he did not approve, had somehow managed the children far better than Maud was now able to do.

At the present time, so Mr. Tapster admitted to himself with something very like an inward groan, his two sons possessed every vice of which masculine infancy is capable. They had become—so he was told by their indignant nurses—the terror of the well-behaved children who shared with them the pleasures of the Park Enclosure, where they took their daily exercise; and baby, once so sweet and good, was now very fretful and peevish.

Again the train of Mr. Tapster's mournful thoughts was disturbed by a curious little sound—that of someone creeping softly down the staircase leading from the upper floors of his house.

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Once more he half rose from his chair, only to fall heavily back again with a look of impotent annoyance on his round, clean-shaven face. Where was the use of his going out into the hall and catching Nurse on her way to the kitchen. Maud had declared, very early in the day, that there should be as little communication as possible between the kitchen and the nursery; but their master sometimes found himself in secret sympathy with the two women whose disagreeable duty it was to be always with his three turbulent children.

Mr. Tapster frowned and stared gloomily into the fire; then he suddenly pulled himself together rather sharply, for the door behind him had slowly swung open.

This was intolerable! The parlourmaid had again and again been told that, whatever might have been the case in her former places, no door in Mr. Tapster's house was to be opened without the preliminary of a respectful knock.

Fortified by the memory of what had been a positive order, he turned round and nerved himself to deliver the necessary rebuke. But instead of the shifty-eyed, impudent-looking woman he had thought to see, there stood close to him, so close that he could almost have touched her—Flossy. His wife, or rather the woman who, though no longer his wife, had still, as he had been informed to his discomfiture, the right to bear his name.

A very strange feeling, and one so complicated that it sat uneasily upon him, took instant possession of Mr. Tapster—anger, surprise, and relief warred with one another in his heart.

Then he began to think that his eyes must be playing him some curious trick, for the figure at which he was staring remained strangely still and motionless.

Was it possible that his mind, dwelling constantly on Flossy, had evoked her wraith? But no; looking up in startled silence at the still figure standing before him, he realised that not so would memory have conjured up the

pretty, bright little creature of whom he had once been proud. Flossy still looked pretty, but she was thin and pale, and there were dark rings round her eyes. Also her dress was worn, her hat curiously shabby.

As Mr. Tapster stared up at her, noting these things, one of her hands began playing nervously with the fringe of the dining-table cover, and the other sought the back of what had once been one of her dining-room chairs.

As he watched her making these slight movements, Nature so far re-asserted itself that a feeling of poignant regret, of pity for her—as well as, of course, a much larger share of pity for himself—came over James Tapster.

Had Flossy spoken then—had she possessed the intuitive knowledge of men which is the gift of so many otherwise unintelligent women—the whole of Mr. Tapster's future, to say nothing of her own, might have been different, and, it may be suggested, as regarded the man, happier.

But the moment of softening, of mansuetude, slipped quickly by, and was succeeded by a burst of anger—for Mr. Tapster had suddenly become aware that Flossy's left hand, the little thin hand resting on the back of the chair, was holding two keys which he recognised at once as his property. The one was a replica of the latch-key which always hung on his watch-chain, while the other and larger key, to which was attached a brass tab bearing the name of 'Tapster', and the address of the house, gave access to the Enclosure opposite Cumberland Crescent.

Avoiding her eager, pitiful look, Mr. Tapster set himself to realise, with a shrewdness for which William and Maud would never have given him credit, what Flossy's possession of those two keys had meant during the last few months.

This woman, who both was and was not Mrs. Tapster, had retained the power to come freely in and out of *his* house! She had been able to make her way, with or without the connivance of the servants, into *his* children's

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nursery at any hour of the day or night convenient to herself. With the aid of that Enclosure key she had no doubt often seen the children during their daily walk! In a word, Flossy had been able to enjoy all the privileges of motherhood while having forfeited all those of happy wifehood.

His mind hastened heavily on—what a fool he must have looked before his servants, how they must have laughed to think that he was being so deceived and taken in! Why, even the policeman who stood at point duty outside must have known all about it.

Small wonder that Mr. Tapster felt extremely incensed; small wonder that his heart, hardening, solidifying, expelled any feeling of pity provoked by Flossy's sad and downcast appearance.

'I must request you,' he said, in a voice which even to himself sounded harsh and needlessly loud, 'to give up those keys which you hold in your hand. You have no right to their possession, and I grieve to think that you took advantage of my great distress of mind not to return them with the things of which I sent you a list by my brother William. I cannot believe'—and now Mr. Tapster lied as only the very truthful can lie on occasion—'I cannot believe, I say, that you have taken advantage of my having overlooked those keys, and that you have had the impudence before to-night to force yourself into this house! Still less can I believe that you have taught our—*my*—children to deceive their father!'

Even when uttering his first sentence he had noticed that there had come over Flossy's face an expression of obstinacy which he had once well known and always dreaded. It had been Flossy's one poor weapon against her husband's superior sense and power of getting his own way, and sometimes it had vanquished him in that fair fight which is always being waged between the average husband and wife.

'You are right,' she cried passionately; 'I have not taught the children to deceive you! I have never come into this house until I felt sure that they were asleep and alone, though I've often wondered that they never woke up and knew that their own mother was there. But more than once, James, I've felt like going after that Society which looks after badly-treated children—for the last nurse you had for them was cruel, cruel! If she hadn't left you I should have *had* to do something. I used to feel desperate when I saw her shake Baby in her pram; why, one day, in the Enclosure, a lady spoke to her about it, and threatened to tell her—her mistress——'

Flossy's voice sank to a shamed whisper. The tears were rolling down her cheeks; she was speaking in angry gasps; and what she said actually made James Tapster feel, what he knew full well he had no reason to feel, ashamed of himself.

'That is why,' she went on, 'that is why I have, as you say, forced myself into your house, and why, too, I have now come here to ask you to forgive me—to take me back—just for the sake of the children.'

Mr. Tapster's mind was one that travelled surely if slowly. He saw his chance and seized it.

'And why,' he said impressively, 'had that woman—the nurse, I mean—no mistress? Tell me that, Flossy! You should have thought of all that before you behaved as you did.'

'I didn't know—I didn't think——'

Mr. Tapster finished the sentence for her. 'You didn't think,' he observed, again speaking impressively, 'that I should ever find you out.'

Then there came over him a morbid wish to discover—to learn from her own lips—why Flossy had done such a shameful and extraordinary thing as to be unfaithful to her marriage vow.

'Whatever made you behave so?' he asked in a low

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voice. 'I wasn't unkind to you, was I? You had a nice, comfortable home, hadn't you?'

'I was mad,' she answered with a touch of sharp weariness. 'I don't suppose I could ever make you understand, and yet,' she looked at him deprecatingly, 'I suppose, James, that you too were young once, and—and—mad?'

Mr. Tapster stared at Flossy. What extraordinary things she said! Of course he had been young once; for the matter of that he didn't feel old—not to say old—even now. But he had always been perfectly sane—she knew that well enough. As for her calling herself mad, that was a mere figure of speech. Of course, in a sense she had been mad to do what she had done, and he was glad that she now understood this, but her saying so simply begged the whole question, and left him no wiser than he was before.

There was a long, tense silence between them. Then Mr. Tapster slowly rose from his armchair and faced his wife.

'I see,' he said, 'that William was right. I mean I suppose I may take it that that young fellow has gone and left you?'

'Yes,' she said, with a curious indifference, 'he has gone and left me. His father made him take a job out in Brazil just after the divorce case was through.'

'And what have you been doing since then?' asked Mr. Tapster suspiciously. 'How have you been living?'

'His father gives me two pounds a week.'

Flossy still spoke with that curious indifference. 'I tried to get something to do,' she hesitated, then offered the lame explanation, 'just to have something to do; for I've been awfully lonely and miserable, James. But I don't seem to be able to get anything.'

'If you had written to Mr. Greenfield, or to William, they would have told you that I had arranged for you to have an allowance,' he said, and then again he fell into silence. . . .

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Mr. Tapster was seeing a vision of himself, magnanimous, forgiving—taking the peccant Flossy back to his heart, and becoming once more, in a material sense, comfortable! If he acceded to her wish, if he made up his mind to forgive her, he would have to begin life all over again, move away from Cumberland Crescent to some distant place where the story was not known—perhaps to Clapham, where he had spent his boyhood.

But how about Maud? How about William? How about the very considerable expense to which he had been put in connection with the divorce proceedings? Was all that money to be wasted?

Mr. Tapster suddenly saw the whole of his little world rising up in judgment, smiling pityingly at his folly and weakness. During a long, and what had been till this last year, a very prosperous life, Mr. Tapster had always steered his safe course by what may be called the compass of public opinion; now, when navigating an unknown sea, he could not afford to throw that compass overboard, so——

‘No,’ he said, ‘no, Flossy. It would not be right for me to take you back. *It wouldn’t do.*’

‘Wouldn’t it?’ she asked piteously. ‘Oh! James, don’t say “no” like that, all at once. People do forgive each other—sometimes. I don’t ask you to be as kind to me as you were before; only to let me come home and see after the children?’

But Mr. Tapster shook his head. The children! Always the children! He noticed, even now, that she didn’t say a word of wanting to come back to *him*; and yet he had been such a kind, nay, if Maud were to be believed, such a foolishly indulgent, husband.

And then Flossy looked so different. It was almost as if a stranger were standing there before him. Her appearance of poverty shocked him. Had she looked well and prosperous, he would have felt injured, and yet her pinched face

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and shabby clothes certainly repelled him. So again he shook his head, and there came into his face a look which Flossy had always known in the old days to spell finality; and, when he again spoke, she saw that her knowledge had not misled her.

‘I don’t want to be unkind,’ he said ponderously. ‘If you will only go to William, or write to him—it will be better for you not to go to the office,’—Mr. Tapster did not like to think that anyone once closely connected with him should ‘look like that’ in his brother’s office—‘he will tell you what you had better do. I’m quite ready to make you a good allowance—in fact, it’s all arranged. You need not have anything more to do with that fellow’s father and his couple of pounds a week; but William thinks, and I must say I agree, that you ought to go back to your maiden name, Flossy, as being more fair to me.’

‘And am I never to see the children again?’ she asked.

‘No; it wouldn’t be right for me to let you do so.’

He hesitated, then added, ‘They don’t miss you any more now,’—and with no unkindly intent he concluded, ‘soon they’ll have forgotten you altogether.’

And then, just as Mr. Tapster was hesitating, seeking for a suitable and not unkindly sentence of farewell, he saw a very strange, almost a desperate, look, come over Flossy’s face, and, to his surprise, she suddenly turned and left the room, closing the door very carefully behind her.

He stared after her. How very odd of her to say nothing! And what a queer look had come over her face! He could not help feeling hurt that she had not thanked him for what he knew to be a very generous and unusual provision on the part of an injured husband. . . . Mr. Tapster took a silk handkerchief out of his pocket and passed it twice over his face, then once more he sought and sank into the arm-chair by the fire.

Even now he still felt keenly conscious of Flossy’s near-

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ness. What could she be doing? Then he straightened himself and listened.

Yes, it was as he feared; she had gone upstairs—upstairs to look at the children, for now he could hear her coming down again. How obstinate she was—how obstinate and ungrateful! Mr. Tapster wished he possessed the courage to go out into the hall and face her, in order to tell her how wrong her conduct was. Why, she had actually kept the keys—those keys that were his property!

Suddenly he heard her light footsteps hurrying down the hall. Now she was opening the front door. It slammed, and again Mr. Tapster felt pained to think how strangely indifferent Flossy was to his interests. Why, what would the servants think, hearing the front door slam like that?

But still, now that it was over, he was glad the interview had taken place, for henceforth—or so at least Mr. Tapster believed—the Flossy of the past, the bright, pretty, prosperous Flossy of whom he had been so proud, would cease to haunt him.

He remembered with a feeling of relief that she was going to write to his brother William; of course she would then, among greater renunciations, be compelled to return the two keys, for they—that is, his brother and himself—would have her in their power. They would not behave unkindly to her—far from it; in fact, they would try and arrange for her to live with some quiet lady in a country town some way from London. Mr. Tapster had not evolved this scheme for himself; it had been done in a similar case—one of those cases which, in the long ago, when he was still a single man, had aroused his pitying contempt for husbands who allow themselves to be deceived even in these godless modern days.

Then Mr. Tapster began going over each incident of the strange little interview, for he wanted to tell his brother William exactly what had taken place.

His conscience was quite clear except with regard to one

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matter, and that, after all, needn't be mentioned to William. He felt rather ashamed of having asked the question which had provoked so wild an answer—so unexpected a retort.

Mad? What had Flossy meant by asking him if he had ever been mad? No one had ever used the word in connection with James Tapster before—save once. Oddly enough, that occasion also had been connected with Flossy in a way; for it had happened when he had gone to tell William and Maud of his engagement.

It was on a fine day nine years ago come this May, and he had found William and William's wife walking in their little garden on Haverstock Hill. His kind brother, as always, had been most sympathetic, and had even made a suitable joke—Mr. Tapster remembered it very sadly to-night—concerning the spring and a young man's fancy; but Maud had been really disagreeable. She had said, 'It's no use talking to you, James, for you're mad—quite mad!' He had argued the matter out with her good-temperedly, and William had supported him in pointing out that he was doing an entirely sane thing in marrying Flossy Ball. He might be fifty-seven, but he was still quite vigorous. But Maud again and again had exclaimed in her determined, aggravating voice, 'I say you are mad. They don't let lunatics marry—and just now you *are* a lunatic, James!'

Strange that he should remember all this to-night; for, after all, it had nothing to do with the present state of affairs.

Mr. Tapster felt rather shaken and nervous; he pulled out his repeater watch; but, alas! it was still very early—only ten minutes to nine. He couldn't go to bed yet. Perhaps he would do well to join a club. He had always thought rather poorly of business men who belonged to social West-end clubs—most of them were idle, lazy fellows; but still, circumstances alter cases.

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Suddenly he began to wish that Flossy had remained with him a little longer.

He thought of all sorts of things—improving, kindly remarks—he would have liked to say to her. He blamed himself for not having offered her any refreshment; she would probably have refused to take anything; but still, it was wrong on his part not to have thought of it. Two pounds a week for everything, and in these times? No wonder she looked starved. Why, his own household bills, exclusive of wine or beer, had worked out, since he had had this new expensive housekeeper, at something like thirty shillings a head—a fact which he had managed to conceal from Maud, who ‘did’ her William so well on exactly eighteen and sixpence all round!

It struck nine from the neighbouring church where Mr. Tapster had sittings—but where he seldom was able to go on Sunday mornings, for he was proud of being among those old-fashioned folk who still regard Sunday as essentially a day of rest—and there came a sudden sound of hoarse shouting from the road outside.

Though he was glad of anything that broke the oppressive silence with which he felt encompassed, Mr. Tapster found time to tell himself that it was disgraceful that vulgar street brawlers should invade so quiet a residential thoroughfare as Cumberland Crescent. But order would soon be restored, for the sound of a policeman’s whistle cut sharply through the air.

The noise, however, continued. He could hear the tramp of feet hurrying past his house, and then leaving the pavement for the other side of the road. What could be the matter? Something very exciting must be going on just opposite his front door—that is, close to the Enclosure railings.

Mr. Tapster got up from his chair, and walked in a leisurely way to the wide window; he drew aside the thick

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red damask curtains which dated from his own mother's day, and lifted a corner of the blind.

Then, through the slightly foggy haze, he saw that which greatly surprised him, and made him feel actively indignant, for a string of people—men, women, and boys—were hurrying into the Enclosure garden—that sacred place set apart for the exclusive use of the nobility and gentry who lived in Cumberland Crescent and the adjoining terraces.

What an abominable thing! Why, the grass would all be trampled down; and these dirty people, these slum folk who seem to spring out of the earth when anything of a disagreeable or shameful nature is taking place—a fire, for instance, or a brawl—might easily bring infectious diseases on to those gravel paths where the little Tapsters and their like run about playing their innocent games. Some careless person had evidently left the gate unlocked, and the fight, or whatever it was, must be taking place inside the Enclosure!

Had this been an ordinary night, Mr. Tapster would have gone back to the fire, but now the need for human companionship was so strong upon him that he stayed at the window, and went on staring at the curious shadowy scene.

Soon he saw with satisfaction that something like order was to be restored. A stalwart policeman—in fact, his friend the officer who was always at point duty some yards from his house—now stood at the gate of the Enclosure, forbidding any further passing through.

Mr. Tapster tried in vain to see what was going on inside the railings, but everything beyond the brightly-lighted road was wrapped in grey darkness.

All at once, someone held up high a flaming torch, and the watcher at the window saw that the crowd which had managed to force its way into the Park hung together, like bees swarming, on the lawn through which flowed the

ornamental water. With the gleaming of the yellow, wavering light there had fallen a sudden hush and silence, and Mr. Tapster wondered uneasily what those dirty people were doing there, and what it was they were pressing forward so eagerly to see.

Then he realised that it must have been a fight after all, for now the crowd was parting in two, and down the lane so formed Mr. Tapster saw coming towards the gate, and so in a sense towards himself, a rather pitiful little procession. Someone had evidently been injured, and that seriously, for four men, bearing a sheep-hurdle on which lay a huddled mass, were walking slowly towards the guarded gate, and he heard distinctly the gruffly uttered words: 'Stand back, please—back there! We're going to cross the road.'

The now large crowd suddenly swayed forward; indeed, to Mr. Tapster's astonished eyes, they seemed to be actually making a rush for his house; and a moment later they were pressing round his area railings.

Looking down on the upturned faces below him, Mr. Tapster was very glad that a stout pane of glass stood between himself and the sinister-looking men and women who seemed to be staring up at him, or rather at his windows, with faces full of cruel, wolfish curiosity.

He let the blind fall to gently. His interest in the vulgar, sordid scene had suddenly died down; the drama was now over; in a moment the crowd would disperse, and the human vermin—but Mr. Tapster would never have used, even to himself, so coarse an expression—would be on their way back to their burrows. But before he had even time to re-arrange the damask curtains in their right folds, there came a sudden, loud, persistent knocking, at his own front door.

Mr. Tapster turned sharply round, feeling justly incensed. Of course he knew what it was—some good-for-nothing urchin finding a vent for his excited feelings.

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While it was quite proper that the police should have hurried on with their still burden to the nearest hospital or workhouse infirmary, they should have left at least one constable to keep order. His parlourmaid, who was never in any hurry to open the door—she had once kept him waiting ten minutes when he had forgotten his latch-key—would certainly take no notice of this unseemly noise, but he, James Tapster, would himself hurry out and try and catch the delinquent, take his name and address, and so thoroughly frighten him.

As he reached the door of the dining-room Mr. Tapster heard his front door open—open, too, and this was certainly very surprising, from the outside! In the hall he saw that it was a policeman—in fact, the officer on point duty close by—who had opened the front door, and apparently with a latch-key.

In the moment that elapsed before the constable spoke, Mr. Tapster's mind had had time to formulate a new theory.

How strange it was that he had never heard the fact that the police have means of access to every house on their beat! The fact surprised, but did not alarm him, for our hero was one of the great army of law-abiding citizens in whose eyes a policeman is no human being, subject to the same laws, the same temptations and passions, which afflict ordinary humanity. No, no; in Mr. Tapster's eyes a constable could do no wrong, although he might occasionally stretch a point to oblige such a man as was Mr. Tapster himself.

But what was the constable saying—speaking, as constables always do to the Mr. Tapsters of this world, in respectful and subdued tones?

'Can I have a word with you, sir? There's been a sad accident, I'm sorry to have to tell you. Your lady fallen in the water. We found these keys in her pocket, and then someone said she was Mrs. Tapster,'—and the speaker held

out the two keys which had played a not unimportant part in Mr. Tapster's interview with Flossy.

'A man on the bridge saw her go in,' went on the policeman, 'so she wasn't in the water long, and we soon found her. I suppose you would like her taken upstairs, sir?'

'No, no,' stammered Mr. Tapster, 'not upstairs. The children are upstairs.'

Mr. Tapster's round, prominent eyes were shadowed with a great horror, and an even greater surprise. He stood staring at the man before him, his hands clasped in a wholly unconscious gesture of supplication.

The constable gradually edged himself backwards into the dining-room. Realising that he must take on himself the onus of decision, he gave a quiet look round.

'If that's the case,' he said firmly, 'we had better bring her in here. That sofa that you have there, sir, will do nicely for her to be laid upon, while they try to bring her round. We've got a doctor already—'

Mr. Tapster bent his head; he was too much bewildered to propose any other plan.

And then he turned—turned to see his hall invaded by a strange and sinister quartette. It was composed of two policemen, and of two of those loafers, doubtless livers on the dole of whom he so greatly disapproved. They were carrying a hurdle from which Mr. Tapster quickly averted his eyes.

But though he was able to shut out the sight he feared to see, he could not prevent himself from hearing certain sounds—those, for instance, made by the two loafers, who breathed with ostentatious difficulty, as if to show they were unaccustomed to bearing even so comparatively light a burden as Flossy drowned.

There came a sudden short whisper-filled delay; the doorway of the dining-room was found to be too narrow, and the hurdle was perforce left in the hall.

An urgent voice, full of wholly unconscious irony, mut-

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tered in Mr. Tapster's ear: 'Of course you would like to see her sir,' and he felt himself being propelled forward.

Making an effort to bear himself so that he should not feel afterwards ashamed of his lack of nerve, he forced himself to stare with dread-filled yet fascinated eyes at that which had just been laid upon the leather sofa.

Flossy's hat—the shabby hat which had shocked Mr. Tapster's sense of what was seemly—had gone; her fair hair hung in pale gold wisps about the face already fixed in the soft dignity which seems so soon to drape the features of those who die by drowning. Her widely-opened eyes were now wholly emptied of the anguish with which they had gazed on Mr. Tapster in this very room less than an hour ago. Her mean skimpy frock, from which the water was still dripping, clung closely to her limbs, revealing the slender body which had four times endured, on behalf of Mr. Tapster, the greatest of woman's natural ordeals. But that thought, it is scarcely necessary to say, did not come to add an extra pang to those which that unfortunate man was now suffering; for Mr. Tapster naturally thought maternity was in every married woman's day's work—and pleasure.

It might have been a moment, for all that he knew, or it might have been an hour, when at last something occurred which relieved the unbearable tension of Mr. Tapster's feelings. He had been standing aside helpless, aware of, and yet not watching, the efforts made to restore Flossy to consciousness.

The doctor raised himself at last, and straightened his cramped shoulders and tired arms. With a look of great concern on his face, he approached the bereaved husband.

'I'm afraid it's no good,' he said; 'the shock of the plunge in the cold water probably killed her. She was evidently in poor health, and—and ill nourished. But, of course, we shall go on for some time longer, and——'

But whatever he had meant to say remained unspoken,

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for a telegraph boy, with the impudence natural to his kind, was forcing his way into and through the crowded room.

‘James Tapster, Esquire?’ he cried, in a high childish treble.

The master of the house held out his hand mechanically. He took the buff envelope and stared down at it, sufficiently master of himself to perceive that some fool had apparently imagined Cumberland Crescent to be in South London. Before his eyes swam the line, ‘Delayed in transmission’.

Then, opening the envelope, he saw the message for which he had been waiting so eagerly for some days. But it was with indifference that he now read the words:

‘The Decree has been made Absolute.’

BY
ARNOLD BENNETT



DEATH, FIRE, AND LIFE

I

MR. CURTENTY lay in bed in the winter morning darkness, and reflected upon the horrible injustice of destiny. Mr. Curtenty was a most respectable gentleman—indeed, a connection of the celebrated Jos Curtenty of Longshaw, and, be it admitted, a great deal more dignified than Jos ever was. He had never done anything wrong; his conscience was sinless. In sixty years his dignity and his respectability had not been even compromised. He could, and he did, look everybody unyieldingly in the face. By nature and long practice he was intensely proud and independent. All the world addressed him as ‘Mr.’ Once he had lost a situation through his employer omitting the ‘Mr.’ Of course he had not openly resented the omission, for he was not a fool, but the omission had put him in a frame of mind favourable to quarrelling, and a quarrel about some trifle had ensued. Nevertheless he had soon obtained a new situation, which unhappily he had lost through the death of the new employer.

Since that disaster—now rather more than a year ago—he had been workless, and therefore wageless. Society seemed to blame him for being sixty years old. The fact that he had no particular trade also counted against him. He had always had posts such as watchman, doorkeeper, timekeeper, inspector—posts which meant doing nothing

with dignity. Hence no doubt his feeling of superiority to people who actually did things.

Somehow he could scarce hide this feeling—even from his daughter's husband, who secretly resented it. Jim Crowther was a young miner living at Longshaw, and in the opinion of Mr. Curtenty, Jim's wife, Harriet, had married beneath her. Mr. Curtenty was mistaken in supposing that he had concealed this opinion from Jim and Harriet. Every week he disliked Jim and Harriet more and more, because they were contributing to his subsistence. They were not so crude in their methods of charity as to give him money direct. Certainly not. Such clumsiness would have made an everlasting breach between the two generations. Mr. Curtenty knew naught, officially, of any help. Only it invariably happened that when Mr. Curtenty had not a shilling, Mrs. Curtenty had ten shillings or so, which she produced as it were, apologetically. Mr. Curtenty was diplomatic enough never to enquire whence she had obtained the money.

Thus the twelve lean months had run precariously and unsatisfactorily on.

But a crisis was now upon Mr. Curtenty. For his wife had told him that Harriet had told her that Jim had told Harriet that Mrs. Curtenty could go and live with the Crowthers at Longshaw if she liked, and Mr. Curtenty too. And little by little Mr. Curtenty was given to understand that either he must submit to this humiliation—or starve. Well, Mr. Curtenty had his pride, and he swore to himself that he would not submit to it. He simply could not imagine himself as a helpless pauper dependent in the home of his son-in-law. He conveyed his decision to Mrs. Curtenty, and the next thing he heard was that if he wouldn't go she would! Ah! He saw well enough that the notion was to force him into submission! As if anybody could force him into submission!

Two days previously, it being then a Wednesday, Mr.

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Curtenty had been informed that Mrs. Curtenty would migrate to Longshaw at the end of the week, Saturday. It was now Friday. The supreme catastrophe was indeed shaping. All his life Mr. Curtenty had worried about the future, and his relatives and acquaintances had laughed at him for worrying. But was he not justified by the event? Had he ever been wrong? They twitted him about being miserly. He was not miserly. He had always been careful, and was he not now justified of his carefulness also? Financially, there was the matter of the Post Office Savings Bank account. They did not positively accuse him of keeping a private hoard in the Post Office Savings Bank; but they hinted at it, and no amount of denials by him would stop their hints.

His ear caught a *puffpuff-puffpuff*, the same being the first irregular coughings of the engine of Clayhanger's Steam-Printing Works, which extended from Duck Bank down the opposite side of the lane. These coughings were Mr. Curtenty's morning clock—he had no other, nor watch either. Soon followed the sound of sirens from different parts of the town of Bursley. The hour was seven. Mr. Curtenty slid out of bed from his wife's side, and began with deliberation to dress. He did everything with deliberation. He even looked for work—when he looked for it—with deliberation. (But he had an idea that work ought to look for him.) His nature demanded that he should always have plenty of time in front of him. Time was the basis of dignity; hurry was the enemy of dignity. The first part of his dressing he did in the dark. Then he lit a candle, behind the bed's head, and with a morsel of blacking and an old stumpy brush he softly cleaned his boots—or such poor fragments of them as were left to clean.

A miserable small room, but the totality of Mr. Curtenty's home! Once he had rented a whole house, and could walk from one room to another and go upstairs and

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downstairs and still be at home. . . . A few pitiable bits of furniture, including the little oil-stove on which his wife cooked their so-called meals! Once she had held sway over a whole kitchen-range.

In a dignified way he was sorry for his young and ingenuous, quietly grumbling wife. Not really young, for she was the mother of a mother! But he, at thirty, had married her at nineteen, and to him she had always remained curiously young. There she lay, on the verge of fifty, and looking to the impartial observer more than her age—she had had a wearing life—but to him, in her tranquil, pathetic sleep, she seemed rather like a girl, foolish, feckless, helpless. Yes, he was sorry for her. . . . So she intended on the morrow to migrate to her daughter's at Longshaw, whether he went or not! Unless he yielded she meant to leave him—leave him to his own devices. It had come to that.

On the old tin tray was just enough bread, and dripping, and bits of cured fish to last them till the next morning. Thenceforward, the fiat had been issued from Longshaw, there were to be no more supplies. And then what? He knew that his wife was wondering, and Harriet was wondering, and Jim was wondering what the obstinate, secretive old man would do—what would happen. He alone knew what would happen.

When he had laced his boots under the candle, and combed his hair, he extinguished the candle and finished his toilet in the dark. But the dark was now twilight; the earth was revolving as usual, and in its revolution baring Bursley to the dawn. Mr. Curtenty buttoned his greenish jacket, tied an antique woollen muffler round his collarless neck, put on his cap, and went forth into Woodisun Lane.

He knew he would be too early. He always was too early. He paced smartly but with dignity about Duck Square. A huge tram, packed with people who had work and were going off to do it, rumbled past the Wesleyan

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chapel down Duck Bank towards Hanbridge. Mr. Curtenty stamped his feet into the pavement and rubbed his hands, for January mornings are always dank and chill in the Five Towns. Yet while doing this he pretended with dignity not to feel the cold. At last he descried the postman, and returned to the front door of the cottage in which he occupied one room; and he received the postman majestically on the doorstep.

‘Good morning,’ said the genial postman.

‘Good morning to you,’ said Mr. Curtenty, grandly, and took from the postman a small blue official envelope.

In the privacy of the cottage stairs he opened the envelope. Its contents were quite in order: an authority to withdraw the sum of two shillings from the Savings Bank department of the Post Office. Then Mr. Curtenty drew from his breast-pocket a yellowish bank-book, which showed that twenty pounds stood to his credit, and he carefully put the withdrawal form within the book and replaced the book in his pocket.

Surely you are not surprised! A prudent man must have something up his sleeve for the last emergencies. Mr. Curtenty had maintained that twenty pounds in reserve throughout a year of privation and humiliation. He had lied about it for a year and more than a year. No matter how terrible a plight you may be in, it is always possible to conceive yourself in a still worse plight. That twenty pounds was Mr. Curtenty’s bulwark against the imaginable worse—the fear of which had plagued him for forty years. It was the last defence and resource of his independence.

‘Where ye been?’ asked his waking wife, as he re-entered their home.

‘Getting a breath of air,’ said Mr. Curtenty.

II

In the evening, about half-past seven, Mrs. Curtenty

was lying in bed (for warmth) and Mr. Curtenty was sitting on one of the two chairs, all in the dark, when Mr. Curtenty, after a little shuffling of his legs and scrunching of the chair legs on the bare boards, suddenly rose and felt his way to the door, where his cap and muffler hung on a hook. The pair had had two lean meals and one snack; all the fish was eaten, but not quite all the bread; some tea remained for breakfast. Mr. Curtenty had been abroad once, in the afternoon, and during that period he had cashed the warrant for two shillings. Whether or not his wife had gone out in the same interval he did not know. They had scarcely spoken to each other, not from unfriendliness, but from habit. Not a word had been said about the morrow, or Mr. Curtenty's intentions regarding the morrow. Mrs. Curtenty had not dared to challenge him on the great matter. Indeed, he could not safely be challenged.

Mrs. Curtenty thought to herself now, as she sometimes remarked to her daughter:

'Things'll work themselves out if you leave 'em alone.'

This was her philosophy in face of Mr. Curtenty's terrible estranging dignity and independence. All she said was, as Mr. Curtenty fumbled on the cheek of the door:

'Where ye going?'

And all he replied was:

'A breath of air.'

He left without looking at the companion of his life. Even if he had looked at her he could not have seen her in the darkness. Still, he might have lit the last inch of candle for a few seconds and looked at her, for the moment was one of farewell after a companionship of thirty years. But his sentimental emotions had been numbed, frozen by misfortune, by spiritual pride, by privation, by secretiveness, by hidden anger against fate, and by self-righteousness. So he just went. He knew that his young wife would fall asleep and stay asleep.

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It was a raw night in Woodisun Lane, and a muddy.

He had not meant to visit the Free Reference Library in the Wedgwood Institution, but as a measure of precaution he decided to do so. He was at home in that warm refuge of the unemployed, the Wedgwood Institution. The horrid, stuffy, damp smell of the Reference Library delighted his nose. After the usual formalities he obtained Quain's *Dictionary of Medicine*, and, taking the thick volume to a desk, he turned over its pages with the deliberate majesty of a vicar searching in the Bible for the lesson appointed to be read.

His brain was absolutely clear. He was not out of his mind, nor out of any part of his mind. In no circumstances would he migrate to his son-in-law's. His wife might go; she indeed would go; and she would be happy there, or at least contented. The twenty pounds (less two shillings) which he had guarded for an ultimate contingency would be useless to him, because too soon exhausted. He might of course fend for himself, all alone, for a time on the twenty pounds; but if he did so his family would know for sure that he had had a secret hoard after all, and he could not bear that revelation; it would too seriously humiliate him. Moreover, when the twenty pounds was gone—what then? Merely the same crucial, unanswerable problem as now! No! He had had enough, and there could be but one answer to the question, To be or not to be?

Quain was perfectly explicit: 'The soluble cyanides, more especially the cyanide of potassium, largely used by photographers and by electro-platers, are common articles of commerce, and produce the same deadly results as the acid itself. The fatal dose of prussic acid is the equivalent of less than one grain of the anhydrous acid.'

Nothing could be simpler to the understanding. He had read it before, but he wished to refresh his memory and so avoid the possibility of blunder. He refrained from pro-

ceeding to read about the effect of the poison; he had read that also before; it was rather disturbing, sensational.

He closed the stately tome and grandly handed it back across the counter to the pert young thing in a jersey who had dominion there. None could have guessed, as he calmly descended the broad steps of the Institution, that he was solemnly marked out and divided that night from every other soul in the town.

He made his way to Critchlow's in St. Luke's Square. Critchlow's was the oldest chemist in Bursley. He knew Critchlow slightly—a sardonic and antique being who would as lief as not sell poison to a customer who he guessed meant to drink it. Not that there was any trouble about buying poisons in those distant days at the end of the nineteenth century. You could pick a phial of tablets out of a mahogany case and pay for it and walk off with, for instance, as much sulphonal as would finish a whole family—and no question asked and no eyebrow lifted. And if perchance Critchlow should ask a question about 'Scheele's Acid', the trade name of the anhydrous prussic, Mr. Curtenty (who had never heard of sulphonal) could easily refer to electro-plating; for he had once had a temporary job on a small electro-plating works in Knype; hence his knowledge of the matter.

Critchlow's, however, was closed. Monstrous that the shop should be closed on that night of all nights! Holl's clock across the Square showed six minutes to eight, and Critchlow's had no right to be closed until eight. But Critchlow's was closed. The old fellow was allowing himself to become a bit capricious in his latter years.

Mr. Curtenty had purposely driven the transaction as late as convenient, for he desired a deserted, nocturnal town for his mortal work; but he now saw the possibility of having cut the thing too fine. Still, there was Salter's, in the Market Place—all on the way to the empty playground, beyond the Town Hall, which he had selected for

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his end. He walked to the top of the Square, and turned to the right where the Market Place was. He had an idea that Salter's kept open till nine o'clock. Salter's was open, and he entered the shop, which happened to be empty, behind the counter as well as in front of it.

Salter's was the new chemistry in Bursley. Salter, a daring and optimistic fellow from Birmingham, had taken over the ramshackle old shop from the dying hand of the historic chemist who, for more than fifty years, had sold drugs and given advice to the old-fashioned élite of the ramshackle old town. Salter had provided a new ideal for the ramshackle old town. The interior of the shop had been expensively refurnished from floor to high ceiling. It shone; it glittered; it was orderly; it was the cleanest thing in Bursley; it had an antiseptic, tonic odour; its clock was accurate; it offered chairs, mirrors, and a weighing-machine for the use of customers. It displayed more tooth-brushes than a quarter of a century earlier had been employed in the whole of Bursley. Mr. Curtenty was not impressed. He had the native's distaste for and suspicion of all that was 'showy' and that was not ramshackle.

A fine young gentleman, Mr. Salter himself (no apron), appeared from the dark backward of the establishment, glided along the length of the counter, and became a note of interrogation to Mr. Curtenty, whose tongue—very surprisingly—clave to his palate and whose throat grew parched.

'I want some Scheele's Acid.'

Mr. Salter stared at Mr. Curtenty, and Mr. Curtenty, invigorated and challenged by the stare, returned it.

'Photographic work?'

Mr. Curtenty nodded. 'Aye!'

'How much?'

'Dun' know. Smallish bottle.'

'Half a pint?'

'Aye! That'll do.'

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'I'll get you to sign the poison book.'

'Aye!'

Mr. Salter moved about behind the counter, and in a startlingly brief space of time was slapping a salmon-tinted poison label on a corked bottle. (Never within Mr. Curtenty's experience had seconds passed so quickly.) The next instant he had screwed the bottle into a bit of wrapping-paper, and he was in the act of handing it to Mr. Curtenty when a great lady entered the shop and Mr. Salter turned to her with eager and yet dignified deference, excusing himself negligently to Mr. Curtenty.

But Mr. Curtenty held the bottle. He held it victoriously; and it was no longer a bottle in a bit of paper—it was a sacred phial, magic, omnipotent, more powerful than man and than God. It held the key to the riddle of the future, and the short answer to the arguments of the past. It gave Mr. Curtenty a sense of absolutism, of independence, of dignity, of conquest over earth, such as he had never had. It rendered Mr. Curtenty heroic, magnificent. Already he was leaving earth. He had no interest in earth; he was sick of it, disgusted with it. He yearned bitterly to be quit of it. He had little or no fear, for fear presumes imagination, and he had little or no imagination. He forgot the teachings of religion and the wrath of God, or, if he remembered them, remembered them only to despise them. He was the supreme egotist. He thought of nobody but himself. He was absorbed in himself. Some faint vision of an inquest flickered transiently through his brain. He sniggered at it and it vanished. He was triumphant. He was a hero, a conquerer, a poet. He was God.

'One-and-twopence, please,' murmured Mr. Salter, between two respectful sentences addressed to the lady.

'*One-and-twopence!*' cried Mr. Curtenty, dropping the florin which he was holding suspended in mid-pocket. '*One-and-twopence!* Why! It hadn't ought to be more than tenpence-halfpenny!'

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'I'm afraid it's one-and-two,' said Mr. Salter, calmly.

'Not *me!*' Mr. Curtenty growled with finality, and, dropping the bottle on to the round indiarubber mat intended to receive coins, he walked with fury and grandeur out of the shop, not caring for forty Salters nor forty great ladies.

He muttered things to himself. Did Salter suppose that *he* was going to help to pay for all the fal-lals and gimcrackery of his new shop? Not him! They called him a miser and a skinflint. They might. But fair was fair, and impudence was impudence. Impudence, that was what it was! Impudence! Let Mr. Salter charge his one-and-twopence to them as had quarterly bills and wouldn't pay cash. But not to *him!* He knew to a certainty that Fresson, the 'cash chemist' in Hanbridge, the great price cutter, would sell him half a pint of Scheele's Acid for tenpence, if not ninepence-halfpenny. And to Fresson's he would go. Fresson's did not close until ten o'clock. Fresson was the friend of the poor and a hard-working man who toiled early and late. . . . Impudence! Impudence! . . .

People passing in the Market Place heard and saw Mr. Curtenty muttering and chuntering to himself. He noticed with resentment that he was observed, and walked off in the direction of Hanbridge. His resolution to carry out his plan was as firm as ever—for nothing could shake it—but he was equally determined not to be done in the eye.

III

Woodisun Lane is one of the ways from Bursley to Hanbridge. Indeed, from Bursley Market Place it is the shortest and the oldest way, but by far the worst way, by reason both of its gradients and its foul surface. However, Mr. Curtenty took it, in order, by a glance at the window of his home, to see whether Mrs. Curtenty was wastefully

burning the last inch of the candle. She was not; the window gave no sign of light. Strange to say, Mrs. Curtenty's thriftiness disappointed him, because he wanted another grievance, he wanted dozens of grievances, to gather into his breast as St. Sebastian gathered arrows.

He had to be content with the one great grievance against Mr. Salter—Mr. Salter, who by his rapacity was forcing a determined and desperate man to walk unnecessarily over to Hanbridge on a dank night. Soon, by dint of reflection and savage concentration, the grievance swelled till it filled his whole mind and heart and soul.

Nearly at the top of the hill, at Bleakridge, Woodisun Lane debouches into the main thoroughfare, Trafalgar Road. Somewhat farther on is the football ground, where Bursley had never yet defeated Knype, and then there is a corner upon which had stood for centuries a small earthenware manufactory—one small manufactory succeeding another there from Plantagenet times onwards. Young Eddie Colclough had recently razed a small manufactory to the ground and was just finishing the erection of a new one of an experimental type wherein various modern dodges of economic organisation were to be tested.

As he passed the building Mr. Curtenty's watchman's-nose sniffed the air, in the manner of a tiger sniffing distant blood. Mr. Curtenty became a nose and nothing but a nose; and his grievance and his purpose were equally forgotten. It might be said that Mr. Curtenty had no trade, but that he had a profession was richly demonstrated in that sniffing moment. He sniffed the night-watchman's arch-foe—smoke, indicating fire.

He looked at the façade, whose upper windows were still unglazed, and could see no curling wisp of smoke. But he had faith in his nose. Though the gates of the large central archway had not yet been put in place, the archway was stoutly boarded, and Mr. Curtenty could not get through it. He ran along and climbed a rough fence at

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the side of the manufactory, and so reached the back, which was less securely protected than the front from marauders. The next instant he was in the strewn quadrangle, or 'yard' as it is called. And his nose was justified, for he saw smoke meandering furtively, ominously, from a first-floor window. And his eyes detected a faint glow within.

Mr. Curtenty was gloriously alive. The price of Scheele's Acid was nothing to him. He was professionally inspired. He was happy in the midst of calamity and conflagration. He knew the first thing to do and the second thing to do, and did not hesitate a moment. In a quarter of a minute he was in Trafalgar Road again. A policeman, a policeman to take charge! But there was no policeman. In the Five Towns, so different from other localities, when you are engaged in the practice of virtue and philanthropy there never is a policeman within a mile; it is only when you happen to be delinquent that policemen spring magically out of the earth. There was nobody except three giggling and shrieking girls, arms mutually entwined round necks, swinging along the oozy pavement. Mr. Curtenty ignored them. But at the corner of the tiny Square, in front of Bleakridge's yellow church, burned a red lamp. Dr. Ackerington's, of course! Mr. Curtenty, forgetting dignity, and yet somehow preserving it, ran to the house and violently rang the bell. He rang it three times with increasing violence.

The door opened.

'Ere! You're in a 'urry,' said a stern, fat, middle-aged maid in cap and apron, as soon as she had satisfied herself that Mr. Curtenty did not belong to the ruling class.

'Ave ye got th' telephone here?' Mr. Curtenty demanded stiffly.

'And if we have! You can't use it.'

'Who wants for to use it? You tell your master or missus as Colclough's new pot-banks afire, and they mun tele-

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phone for th' fire brigade.' And as the wench, startled and impressed and stricken, did not immediately move, he added: 'And look slippy!' Then he ran off.

Within the quadrangle of the works once more he desecrated in the darkness what looked like a mound of sand. He put his hand into it. It was a mound of sand. Seizing one of several buckets which the builder's men had left, he filled it with sand and searched for and found stairs and gingerly mounted them in the black darkness, and guided by his triumphant nose he passed through a corridor and into a large suffocating room, which room was illuminated by the fire.

Planks of wood were just beginning to crackle. With the sand he smothered their ardour. But there was not enough sand. He descended again, with empty bucket, bungled the stairs, fell, hurt his ankle, swore, limped, got more sand, ascended. After three such ascents he had extinguished the fire and was in darkness. But he had seen enough to decide the origin of the fire. The usual thing! Workmen's negligence. They had been bivouacking in the room, they had made a fire in the grateless hearth—one of your sprawling fires—and they had not put it out on leaving. A few embers had reached a plank leaning at a broad angle against the mantelpiece, had patiently attacked the root of the plank—a slow business, but in the end successful; the plank deprived of its base, had fallen sideways on to a heap of other planks. And so on. Had not the entire place sweated with damp it might have been a heap of ruins at the moment when Mr. Salter's rapacity had driven Mr. Curtenty in the direction of Hanbridge.

Mr. Curtenty, his occupation gone, limped through other corridors and rooms until he saw the light of Trafalgar Road street-lamps through an unglazed window. He looked out, himself unseen. A crowd, small but increasing, was gazing stolidly up at the façade of the works. It could

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perceive nothing of interest; it had no impulse to do anything; it merely gazed, in the faint hope of witnessing some terrific catastrophe. No policeman! No fire-engine! A tramcar roared by, unheeding. Mr. Curtenty continued to look out, proud, patient, invisible, scornful of the crowd. He was triumphant—nearly as triumphant as he had been fifty minutes earlier when he held the sacred phial in his hand. What a world! What destiny!

The expectant crowd in the mire was in due course rewarded by the exciting arrival, from Hanbridge way, of a motor-car full of people—Eddie Colclough, a young newly-married wife, and friends. Dr. Ackerington being out, Mrs. Ackerington had telephoned not only to the fire brigade, but to Eddie, who lived at Cauldon, between Hanbridge and Oldcastle. Mr. and Mrs. Eddie were entertaining at dinner two gentlemen and a lady, and, all being young and adventurous, they had instantly decided to leave dinner and come in a body to the scene of the announced conflagration.

Mr. Curtenty, seeing them and guessing that Mr. Colclough must be among them, went downstairs with pain in his ankle. Eddie, followed by Mrs. Eddie and the others, was in the quadrangle almost before him.

‘Where’s the fire?’ Mr. Colclough demanded fiercely, in bewilderment; he was intensely relieved to see no evidence of a fire, but also—rather illogically—annoyed to see no evidence of a fire.

‘It ain’t anywhere. I’ve put it out,’ answered Mr. Curtenty, coldly, challengingly.

‘And who the devil are you, anyway?’ cried Mr. Colclough, who was of an aggressive and hasty disposition.

‘Mr. Curtenty’s my name,’ said Mr. Curtenty, ‘and if you’ll come upstairs I’ll shownd ye a thing or two.’ His tone gave pause to Mr. Colclough, and at the same time allayed Mr. Colclough’s rising suspicion of some hanky-panky in the rumour of the fire.

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'Strike a match,' ordered Mr. Colclough at the dark stairs, feeling vainly in his pockets.

'I dunna smoke,' said Mr. Curtenty, grimly.

However, one of the other gentlemen had one of the new-fangled electric torches. The six of them stood in the scene of the conflagration and heard Mr. Curtenty's description of the great episode: how he was passing, how his nose gave the alarm, how he sent for the fire brigade, how he used the sand, how he sprained his ankle, and how all's well that ends well; the whole recital being supported by charred timber and the heavy odour of wood-smoke.

The ray of the electric torch lighted Mr. Curtenty's smoke-grimed face. The rest of them—the fashionable aristocracy, including two young and beautiful women—were in shadow. Mr. Curtenty's tale was faultless; it extorted admiration, a little unwilling perhaps at first from Eddie Colclough, but spontaneous enough from the others, and especially from the women.

'Well, here's something for you,' said Mr. Colclough, and handed Mr. Curtenty a sovereign.

'Thank ye.'

'You must be used to fires,' said Mrs. Colclough, smiling warmly.

Mr. Curtenty majestically offered some of his personal history.

'And who are you working for now?' asked Mr. Colclough.

'I'm playing [out of work],' said Mr. Curtenty.

Mr. Colclough paused.

'What did you say your name was?'

'Mr. Curtenty.'

'Well, look here, Curtenty,' said Mr. Colclough, and paused again, as though hesitating in his mind.

Mr. Curtenty did not repine at the rough, careless omission of the 'Mr.'; experience had been teaching him.

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'Look here, Curtenty. There's no watchman here yet. D'you want a job?'

Mr. Curtenty was engaged on the spot.

Suddenly he hurried from the room. The others followed him. The electric torch lighted him from behind. His ears had been copying the excellent example of his nose. He reached one of the front unglazed windows and put his head through a square. A fire engine had arrived with an enormous fluster and bluster and glint of brass helmets. A fine effort on the part of the Bursley Fire Brigade—forty minutes!

Mr. Curtenty bawled angrily, disdainfully, to the brigade:

'It's out! Get away wi' yer sprinklin' mashane! It's out! I'm a-telling on ye!'

Then he turned and faced the torch.

'You perfect *duck!*' exclaimed young Mrs. Colclough, and carried away by gratitude for a great deed, and by her youthful sentimentalism and the general influence of a honeymoon and the comicality of Mr. Curtenty's dirty tweed cap—in all her beauty and all her finery she put her ringed hands on the shoulders of the old man and kissed his sooty plain face.

IV

In Duck Square (which is really only a bit of Duck Bank and not a square at all) there is an establishment (not to be confused with the Boro' Dining Rooms two doors off) which stays open till a late hour nightly, brilliantly lit amid the surrounding gloom, and which exudes from its interior an odour so appetising and powerful that it has been known to interfere with the Wednesday evening prayer meeting in the Wesleyan chapel a hundred yards away on the opposite side of Trafalgar Road.

Mr. Curtenty entered this establishment and, pulling a

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florin from his pocket, bought two plenteous portions of the finest fried fish. He then bought a candle, though candles were not in her line of business, from the white-clad proprietress, who gave him a few matches into the bargain. Then he went across to the fast-closing Dragon Hotel and in the nick of time bought a bottle of beer. Having unlocked the door of the cottage in Woodisun Lane with his own key, he took off his boots at the bottom of the stairs, struck a light, and proceeded upwards, heavily encumbered, into his one-roomed home.

Young Mrs. Curtenty was fast asleep; the blaze of the candle did not awaken her. He examined her face with a new interest. His heart was loudly beating (but that, of course, was the effect of the stairs—what else could it be?). He was vaguely aware, too, of a non-fleshy throbbing, a quaking, a half-pleasant, half-frightening general disturbance in his mind or his soul or somewhere. He could not quite surely identify the phenomenon. It might have been some imperfect realisation of the dread fact that but for the accident of a fire he would at that moment have been elsewhere, or nowhere at all and nothing at all. On the other hand, it might be due to alarm at his own wild and reckless expenditure in the fried fish shop and the Dragon Hotel.

It was the heavenly odour of the fried fish that first caused his wife to dream a delicious dream and then woke her. As her senses gradually brought her back into the sphere of reality, she opened her ingenuous eyes and saw Mr. Curtenty bending over her, candle in hand. The memory of Mrs. Colclough's kiss was now the chief thing in Mr. Curtenty's mind. It somehow thrilled him, and it somehow took thirty years off Mrs. Curtenty's age.

'Rally thyself up, wench,' said Mr. Curtenty in a tone so startlingly new and attractive to Mrs. Curtenty that she could not move.

He wanted to bend down and embrace her, but was

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prevented by an unconquerable complex that held him fast and told him not to be ridiculous.

'Rally thyself up,' he repeated, 'and put th' blanket round thy shoulders.

'Jimmy,' said she, hopefully, 'then us'll go to Harriet's at Longshaw to-morrow?'

'Not me!'

'I shall,' said she, sadly. 'They'll make me. Ay, lad, I'm going, I am!' She sighed.

'Thee isna', he almost shouted. 'I've gotten a job. Rally up and set this 'ere fish on a platter.'

She raised herself on her elbows and kissed him; *she* had no forbidding complex. The kiss was what he wanted. This kiss was the second in one hour, and the second in perhaps six months or more. And the lips were as cool and fresh as Mrs. Colclough's. And the kiss had a quality mysteriously surpassing that of Mrs. Colclough's.

Mr. Curtenty felt himself obliged for form's sake to show impatience at the salute.

'Ere,' he grunted. 'Thou'rt shaking candle grease all o'er th' bed.'

Nevertheless, he himself adjusted the blanket round his wife's exposed arms and neck.

BY
J. D. BERESFORD



REPARATION

THE belief in fate is as old as the history of man. It looms as a stupendous threat in the life of the savage, a dark influence challenging his every action with the menaces of taboo and totem. But we men and women of this twentieth century, with our knowledge of physics, our chemical theories of a mechanical cosmogony, our ready explanation of every natural and abnormal phenomenon, have won a partial freedom from the old slavery. We stand erect, defying the lightning of the gods and challenging the probability of any supernatural interference with the deliberate course of our ordered existences. We have new words for fate. We speak of chance, of coincidence, or, with a shrug of the shoulders, of luck. We look down with condescension at the feeble savage who cowers before the incomprehensible mandates of his intimate gods.

Even Angus Whitley himself, in these later, successful days of his, has come to smile whimsically at the idea that he could have been driven by the direct interference of any supernormal influence. His blue eyes have lost their old expression of wondering speculation. He is a made man, happily married, happily employed, and he prefers to believe, now, in chance or luck as the sole director of his destiny during those two years in which he worked his passage around the full circumference of the earth. He

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has almost forgotten, though I have not, the harried youngster of twenty-five who surged desperately through the streets of New York, hag-ridden by his furious urgency to end the amazing quest that was then speeding him to the close of his Odyssey.

But I remember his haunted face and the awed intonations of his voice when he first told me his story; and, while I cannot definitely assert that throughout those two adventurous years the spirit of Fuller Herbert stood at Whitley's elbow, prodding him on to complete his mission, I do claim that some deeper, more esoteric influence than luck must be postulated to account for the apparent coincidences. Chance? Yes; but what lies behind the appearance of chance?

Whitley, the young failure of twenty-three, was returning, temporarily defeated, from Cape Town to London, when the thing began. He had gone out eighteen months before as an engineer, and somehow failed to make good. One could find half a dozen reasons to account for his failure—his inexperience, his lack of influence, the conditions of South Africa—it was that uneasy period between the Jameson raid and the Boer War. There is no need in any case to assume that the blight had already settled upon him.

He had, it is true, known Fuller Herbert in Johannesburg, as everybody knew him—that is to say, very slightly. In all his seven years in South Africa, Herbert had never come within sight of making a friend. He was a man apart from the other competitors in the diamond-market, respected both for his knowledge and his shrewdness, but passively disliked; until in the last six months of his stay that feeling was a trifle mitigated by a feeling of pity. Everyone else but himself knew that he was doomed, and he must have known it, subconsciously, though he fought against the realization until—for his own purposes—it was too late. His trouble was some complicated and

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rather mysterious disease of the liver, variously diagnosed by Cape Town specialists as due to tuberculosis and a malignant growth. Whatever it was, there can be no question that during his last days the disease very seriously affected his naturally eccentric mind.

He was a tall, thin man, with a long and prominent nose, a little spiteful mouth, and a small but noticeably aggressive chin. Even before the colour of his skin turned to a high and bitter yellow he was remarkable for his ugliness. There was something mediæval about it. He was like the incarnation of some revolting caricature by Rowlandson or Gilray.

Young Whitley ran across him in Cape Town the day before they sailed, and Herbert did what was for him an unprecedented thing—he made what seemed to be a generous offer when he heard that Angus was going to travel third class.

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘Don’t do that. You’re just the man I want for a secretary on the voyage. I’m going home for good. No end of stuff to settle up. I want someone badly.’

In the surprise of the moment, Angus never thought of refusing. He did not like Fuller Herbert—no one did—but he anticipated no difficulty in putting up with him for three weeks as an employer. Moreover, there was a queer urgency about Fuller, then, that would brook no denial. He did nothing, he seemed to have nothing to do, but his actions and speech were those of a man who had a critical, even a vital, engagement, five minutes ahead—an engagement that was always waiting for him, that engrossed all his attention and never matured.

His air of expectation was not less marked on the boat; indeed, it was rather exaggerated. Angus’s duties as secretary were purely imaginary. Herbert would take him down into his cabin in the morning and begin by making some pretence of business. He would stand by the port-hole—they steamed north through a flat calm until

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they passed Las Palmas—and mutter to himself, as if collecting his thoughts. Occasionally a sentence or two would be addressed directly to Angus.

‘There’s a lot to be done,’ Herbert would say. ‘Everything ought to be rearranged. This afternoon . . .’ Then his glance would wander out through the port-hole, over the diminished expanse of gleaming water, and he would add absently, ‘This afternoon, perhaps—a few letters.’ It seemed as if that immense appointment must be waiting for him on the sky-line; that it might come in sight, now, at any minute.

Angus had his moments of uneasiness, at first. He was a conscientious lad, and he felt that he was not earning his passage. He even tried to make up for his idleness as a secretary by offering his services as personal servant. But Herbert was obviously bothered by these attentions, and presently Angus settled down to doing nothing, with the consolation that it was not *his* fault. He was young; he was on his way home; he was going to see the girl he was engaged to, after eighteen months’ absence; and if he had any presentiment at all, it was that his luck would change, that he would get a job in England, that everything was going to be—all right.

Meanwhile Fuller Herbert’s preoccupation increased with every day’s run northward. The record of that run was, in fact, his sole interest. He never put into the sweep that the financiers continued to organise daily, despite the monotonous regularity of the readings, but he was invariably among the first to get the news. After that, he would stalk away to the quietest corner of the deck—it was too hot to go below—and watch out for that approaching crisis which might at any instant, one inferred, show itself on the horizon.

It was the day after passing Las Palmas that Fuller’s reserve was suddenly broken. The boat was running, full steam, into an Atlantic gale. Angus had been in high

spirits at dinner. His employer had not put in an appearance at that meal, but Angus's excitement was not due to any lack of restraint on that account, but rather to what seemed to him a welcome change after the deadly monotony of the weather during the earlier part of the trip. It pleased him to see the 'fiddles' on the table, to anticipate a more than usually violent gale, to be taking part in some kind of adventure. He was talking eagerly about mining machinery to a man whose acquaintance he had recently made—a man who might be useful, Angus thought, congratulating himself on his worldly wisdom—when a steward summoned him to Herbert's cabin.

Herbert was in his bunk, lying on his side, and he did not open his eyes when Angus came in. For a minute, perhaps, Angus stood uncertainly awaiting his instructions. A sense of oppression and urgency had unexpectedly come to him as he entered that confined space. He laid a hand on the edge of the bunk to steady himself against the roll of the boat, which was getting the force of the increasing gale full on her quarter. But it was not the roaring of the sea smashing now and again passionately at the deadlight that disconcerted him. That fury outside was the splendid, natural vigour of the elements, a revel in which he would willingly have joined. It was the tense, in some way rigid, atmosphere of the cabin that dismayed him. It seemed as if that repulsive yellow figure in the bunk was tremendously holding this one little bubble of his surroundings, starkly stiff and resistant against the whole tumult of the earth; as if by some incredible effort of will he was even defying the movement of time.

And when he spoke his words came from him with an effect both of effort and of restraint that bespoke a double purpose. There was something that had to be done, while with the better part of his will and attention he kept back the entire forces of the universe from prematurely thrusting upon him the pressure of that long-expected appoint-

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ment he had so anxiously awaited.

‘Can you hear, Whitley?’ he began, still with his eyes closed, and the sound of his voice had a quality at once hard and shrill, like the twanging of a strained wire.

When Angus had reassured him he went on more rapidly, in broken, uneven sentences: ‘I’ve an important mission for you—a charge. Think of it as sacred—sacred. I shall know.’

What he meant by that ‘I shall know’ Angus did not pause to inquire. The sentence went straight down into his subconsciousness and stayed there for nearly two years. Only at the last did he wonder vaguely whether it were possible that Fuller could, indeed, have *known*.

‘I knew a young woman—in England. I’ve written her name and address and put them inside the bag,’ Herbert continued. ‘All my fault—she was barely eighteen—and I couldn’t forget—never could forget. . . . Good reasons—my brother—family. . . . Always wanted the family to think that I . . . My brother would make trouble—dispute the will if I put her down in it. He mustn’t know. I’ve been putting diamonds aside for her. They’re all right. The receipts are in the bag. I saved them for her, here and there. She may have a child. The diamonds for them both. But my brother mustn’t know. All my other papers in order. There’s nothing to show. I meant to give them to her myself. I was going home for that. Reparation . . . to make reparation. Couldn’t forget . . .’

Angus, clutching the edge of the bunk, heard every syllable spoken by Herbert. His thin, intense voice seemed to occupy the cabin and drive out the multitudinous clamour of the storm. When he stopped speaking, all the noise of the sea and the ship came back with the rush of a sudden cataract.

‘But do you mean that you want me to . . .’ Angus began, and was surprised to find that he had to shout in order to make himself heard.

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Herbert opened his eyes for the first time, and with a quick jerk shot his hand under his pillow. He produced a small leather bag and tendered it to Angus.

'Diamonds,' he said, in a relaxed voice that broke weakly against the tumult. Then, raising himself slightly on his elbows, he closed his eyes again and made one more heroic effort to stay the procession of time.

'A sacred trust for you,' he said, in those former shrill tones that made Angus think of a fine escape of highly compressed air. 'Sacred. I was afraid I might not—be strong enough—deliver it myself. Chose you—Cape Town—deliberately—in case. Diamonds for Sarah Browning and her child—my child. Deliver as soon as you reach England. Tell no one. No one. My brother raise objections. Go now. See you again in the morning—complete arrangements.'

He sank back with a long sigh, as if the pressure had been removed and the balance with the universe restfully stabilised.

Angus slipped the leather bag into his hip pocket and left the cabin with the solemnity of one afraid of disturbing a religious ceremony. But as soon as he had closed the door behind him he remembered his social duty and harried out the ship's doctor.

The doctor was in Herbert's cabin within a few minutes, but he was too late. Herbert had already gone to keep his appointment.

Angus Whitley's feeling with regard to his 'sacred trust' when he landed at Southampton was mainly one of boredom. He should have been free to go to the girl he was engaged to and discuss their plans for the future; and instead of that he had to undertake a tedious journey to the Midlands to make this vicarious reparation. His one consolation was to be found in the romantic posings natural to his age and temperament. He saw himself definitely as the hero in the coming interview. He heard

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himself modestly disclaiming praise or reward. He came and showered amazing wealth on the head of Sarah Browning. He chose to picture her as a patient, beautiful woman, bowing her head to poverty and the slurs of evil reputation for the sake of her child—and when he had disposed upon her the priceless gift of freedom he retired, unassuming, almost bashful, but with the consciousness of having been the chance instrument of her happiness. He rehearsed that scene until he grew tired of it, and then thanked Heaven that with this one mission his connection with Fuller Herbert's past was finally closed. For all Herbert's other affairs were in strict order—papers, will, instructions, the address of his lawyer in London and that of his brother in Devonshire. The captain of the boat had charge of that. Not even Angus's testimony was required. When he had delivered the fortune in uncut stones, secretly deducted by the testator from the Herbert inheritance, Angus's work was finished.

He was certainly eager to get the job over. He had, as an offset to his romantic conception of himself as the delivering hero, an uneasy sense of doing something slightly illegal. He was aware of a new distrust of his fellow-travellers in the train that was taking him to the village home of the ill-used Sarah Browning. It is not every man of Angus's appearance who can afford to carry uncut diamonds to the value of perhaps fifty thousand pounds in his hip pocket. If, by some unhappy accident, that hoard were discovered, Angus realised that he might find it difficult to account for his possession of that little leather bag.

Besides that condensed wealth, the bag contained nothing but the official receipts for the money paid for the stones—a certificate of legal buying—and Sarah Browning's name and address on a slip of paper. Herbert had cautiously omitted any legal instrument, such as a deed of gift, that would have involved the admission of a fourth

person into the secret. At the last, when his disease had got hold of him, he had without question been suffering from some kind of obsession with regard to this act of reparation. He had even kept it from Angus, his chosen messenger, until the very hour of his august engagement had actually sounded. . . .

Angus arrived at the little village of Halton, four miles from the cathedral city of Medboro', in the early afternoon. Now that he had actually reached his goal, his doubts had momentarily slipped from him. As he made his way toward the village post office, in order to discover the precise situation of Sarah Browning's house or cottage, he warmed again to his part of the glorious messenger.

The postmistress was a stout, communicative woman, with the inquisitive eyes of an official fully conscious of her importance in the management of village affairs.

'Sarah Browning,' she repeated cautiously, with the air of one prepared to temporise. 'Well, of course everyone knows Sally Browning. Why, she was 'ousemaid at the Rectory for—'ow long was it, four years or five?'

'Isn't she there, now?' Angus asked.

'No!' the postmistress returned, and somehow succeeded in making a whole report out of her monosyllable. Her expression was a little coy, as if she asked whether this stranger was not poking fun at her. She obviously deemed it incredible that anyone should believe that Sally Browning was still housemaid at the Rectory.

Angus misread the ingenuousness of one absorbed in local affairs.

'You mean that she *had* to leave?' he asked.

'Well, no, she didn't *'ave* to,' the postmistress replied, still scrutinising him warily. 'She went to better 'erself.'

'How long ago?' Angus inquired.

'Now let me think,' the postmistress began, and did her thinking aloud in an immense paragraph of corroborative

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evidence, finally clinching her date as 'three years last 'arvest', with a triumphant parallel.

Angus was giving her little attention. Quite early in the postmistress's speech that approximate date of a little more than three years had loomed convincingly, and yet he remembered to have heard that Herbert had been in South Africa for seven. Could his mistress, then, have continued, or returned to her work at the Rectory after her child was born? A fragment of Herbert's last speech welled up in his mind. 'She was barely eighteen,' he had said.

'How old would Miss Browning be now, about?' Angus asked.

'Ah, now that I *can* tell you,' his informant said, pouncing on the opportunity for a display of accuracy, 'for she was born the same week as my Lizzie, who'll be twenty-six come the nineteenth o' next month. Dear, dear, 'ow the time flies! Why, I remember . . .' Like most village folk in England, she was more eager to give than to receive information. She had no curiosity concerning the unimaginable world whose affairs moved vaguely beyond the focus of her centred attention. To her the little village of Halton was a complete universe.

'But she hadn't . . . she didn't, then . . .' Angus interrupted her, and paused, unable to pose his question with the tact he felt was demanded of him.

'Adn't what?' the postmistress encouraged him, softly, her head a little askew in her lust for the delivery of knowledge.

'She—she was never in trouble of any sort, I suppose?' Angus asked.

The plump figure of the postmistress fairly quivered with emotion, and her voice dropped to a purring note that conveyed the ultimate expression of confidence. 'N-no. Well, there, to be quite fair, she never was. We used to say as Sally knew 'er way about as well as most.

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Bless you, there was talk enough, one time. Sure to be with a good-looking wench like she was—more particular about seven or eight years ago, when there was a gentleman stayed at the Royal Oak one summer, as went off later to foreign parts, Africa, or somewheres, I heard. But nothin' never 'appened to Sally; leastways not as any one knows of. . . .'

But Angus, his head bowed confidentially over the counter of the little shop, was not attending. His knight-errantry was taking new shape. This good-looking wench who knew her way about as well as most, made no appeal to his sympathies. The feeling of boredom at the prospect of an immense and futile service to the wishes of Fuller Herbert, was growing upon him. He had, without doubt, now, another journey before him, and with no certainty at the end of it. In these three years Sarah Browning might have 'bettered' herself more than once. Already he had received the impression that she was a young woman with a marked capacity for betterment.

'You can give me her address, I suppose?' he said.

A look of distress passed across the face of the postmistress. 'She went—I'm pretty near sure—to Southampton,' she replied, and glanced distrustfully, almost with dread, at a vast collection of untidy papers that littered the rough shelves behind her.

'Don't you forward her letters?' Angus asked.

'Well, she did give me 'er address afore she went,' the postmistress said, uneasily, 'and I did forward one or two letters for 'er just at first, but there ain't been any, now, for years, as you might say—'er being an orphan out of an 'ome and 'avin' no people of 'er own, in a way of speakin'.'

'Do you think you could find that address?' Angus said. 'It's—it's rather important. There is—some money for her. . . .'

'Indeed!' commented the postmistress with her first sign of curiosity in the stranger's business.

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A sudden spasm of impatience seized Angus. He felt that he could not endure another minute of inaction. He wanted passionately to be finished with this absurd 'charge' of his; to find this confounded woman at once and be free to get on with the affairs of his own life. He looked at the horrid litter of papers on the shelves, and in his mind he pictured an immense and intricate research, lasting perhaps for hours, while he tediously examined the deposit that represented Heaven knew how many years of scrupulous ineptitude. It was incredible that the post-mistress could ever have destroyed a single document; not less incredible that she could ever find one.

'I must know her address,' Angus exclaimed, almost fiercely.

And then occurred the first of many coincidences, if they were coincidences, and not due to some direct interference with the dull, habitual movements of natural law. For the postmistress, turning with a sigh of forlorn distress to the awful muddle behind her, let her plump red hand hover for a moment like the beak of a fortune-telling love-bird, and then plunged with the convulsive jerk of an automaton at the very bunch of litter, sere-edged and brittle in places, that contained Sarah Browning's address.

'There you are, then, young man,' she exclaimed, on a high note of triumph. 'Sarah Browning, the Ocean Hotel, Southampton. She went as chambermaid, I remember.'

She glowed to a very ecstasy in the contemplation of her ability for accurate reference, positively flaunting at him the precision and reliability of her official aptitude for business method.

Angus turned with a long sigh of impatience to the obligations of his 'trust'. He had been in Southampton not many hours before. He had even noticed, half-consciously, the façade of the Ocean Hotel—a new building with an effect of conscious cleanliness and rectitude; well built and

badly placed; staring its boast of efficiency across a poor street. He might, for all he knew, have shouldered Sarah Browning on the footway. And now he had to face all the hesitations and interruptions of a return journey, with no certainty of concluding his mission at the end of it. Only he felt he must know, at once, how much farther he might have to go before that little bag of diamonds, snug and warm in his hip pocket, could be delivered. It was the uncertainty that irritated him. He saw himself tracking Herbert's heiress through England. But, no! In the train that night between Waterloo and Southampton he came to a definite resolve. If she had gone from the Ocean Hotel he would go to Devonshire and write to her. His responsibilities went no farther than that. It was absurd and impossible to undertake any more of these fruitless journeys. She must come to him. She was, though she was still unaware of it, magnificently rich. She would be fully compensated for all her trouble, whereas he could anticipate no reward—unless Sarah Browning were unexpectedly generous. And even then he had a certainty that it was not in her nature to be generous.

That resolve, with all its promise of ease and finality, was an imminent goal to him as he bounded up the steps and burst through the solemn doors of the Ocean Hotel. He was panting with eagerness as he demanded the whereabouts of Sarah Browning from the flashily demure woman at the bureau.

'Oh, she's left here years ago,' was the expected reply.

'I know, I know,' assented Angus, 'but where's she gone to?' He was too anxious to remark then, what he afterward recognised as the most important characteristic of the woman he was seeking. She was always remembered. Surely there must have been many chambermaids in service at the hotel since that gaudily staid woman in the office had first undertaken her duties. Yet she had shown no sign of hesitation when Miss Browning's name was

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mentioned. Though Sarah had left the place 'years ago', she was remembered, instantly and with certainty.

'Oh, you'd better ask the manager,' said the woman in the bureau, with a toss of her yellow head. She somehow managed to convey that it was no part of a woman's business to inquire into the ultimate destination of Sarah Browning.

The manager, when found, had an air of almost religious discretion. He seemed to summarise in his own person all the salient aspects of his own hotel. He might have been the model from which the place had been designed. He was so ostentatiously clean and precise, and barrenly efficient; and yet his pale-blue eyes with their sandy lashes had a slightly wistful look, as if he, too, was aware of being essentially the right thing in a wrong position.

He regarded Angus with a touch of practised but half-wistful inquiry.

'Yes, Miss Browning left here—ah—two years last April,' he said, and added, as though to satisfy his own craving for the punctilious, 'Ah—on the twenty-third.'

'Where did she go to?' Angus asked. 'She left her address, I suppose?'

The manager, disregarding the question, delicately picked his teeth with a quill.

'There was a lady here, a Mrs. Creswell, who took a—ah—liking for her,' he continued. 'She—ah—found certain qualities in Miss Browning. We—ah—for the matter of that, all found certain qualities in her. She went back with this lady to—ah—undertake the management of a boarding-house in—ah—Sydney, Australia. Her address is, or was, 307 Pike Street, Sydney—ah—Australia.'

Angus laughed. 'That's a long way to go to find anyone,' he said.

The manager permitted himself no air of surprise. 'It

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is, as you say, a long way,' he agreed. 'If I can—ah—help you in any other way . . . ?'

But the manager's functions, so far as Angus was concerned, were now exhausted. He thanked him and went, almost light-heartedly. The little bag of diamonds still nestled confidingly in his hip pocket, but it was outrageous to suppose that he could be called upon to deliver them in person to Sarah Browning, in Sydney. He would, however, do more than was actually required of him. He would send a cablegram to 307 Pike Street, prepaying the reply, although he could ill afford the expense, and request Herbert's unofficial legatee to communicate with him at once in Devonshire.

And then Fate, deliberate but persistent, caught him at the Central Post Office in Southampton, while he was, with a touch of dismay, disbursing the charge of his cable. A hand was laid on his shoulder and a pleasant voice said, 'Now I call this the most astonishing piece of luck, Mr. Whitley.'

He turned to confront Graham Dixon, the man with whom he had been in conversation when that fateful message had been brought to him at dinner on the night that Fuller Herbert had died.

'I wanted your address and couldn't get it,' Dixon continued, with a friendly smile. 'Since I landed I have found that it will be necessary to send a man, an engineer for choice, out to our works in Sydney, and I judged from our talk on the steamer that you might be willing to take the job. And if you are, you're just the very man I want. Now will you come to my hotel and talk things over?'

Angus stared at him resentfully. 'To Sydney?' he said. 'You want me to go to Sydney? It's a devil of a long way to go.'

For a moment he could not realise that Dixon was offering him what might prove to be a very promising job. He did not think of the job, but only of the 'sacred

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charge' that was again being thrust upon him just when his resolve had relieved him from further effort. Dixon seemed to have come suddenly from nowhere, as if he had been the supernatural agent of Herbert, thrusting again upon Angus the awful urgency of that cursed commission.

Dixon did not appear to notice the gaucheness of the reply. 'Sheer luck,' he went on, evenly, as he led Angus out into the street. 'Honestly, I don't know why I went into that post office. . . .'

Angus listened without appreciating the detail of Dixon's conversation. He did not want to go to Australia. He had been in South Africa for two years, and now, if he were but given a little time, he would, he was sure, find a job at home. But he knew, even as he tried desperately to refuse Dixon's offer, that he would be forced to accept it. He could not oppose Dixon's suave confidence that he would accept it. It was, of course, a chance for him.

'In a sense, a position of peculiar trust,' Dixon explained. 'Things are not going right over there. We have our suspicions of the manager. . . . I chose you because I felt when I first met you that you were essentially a man to be trusted. . . . I should send you in the first place as an assistant engineer at a salary of forty pounds a month, and I want you to report to me privately, on the general management. Later . . .'

'I must go home first, to Devonshire,' Angus put in, and then realised that his stipulation was a form of acceptance.

'By all means,' Dixon agreed. 'Do you think you could be ready to sail in a fortnight's time? If an advance for your outfit would be a convenience, don't hesitate to call upon me.'

So Angus went to Devonshire to meet that girl of his and to wait for the answer to his cable. And no answer

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came. Herbert had warned him to tell nobody about the diamonds, but he disobeyed that injunction so far as his sweetheart was concerned. She could be trusted; and together they revolted against the necessity of his going, and gave way not because they respected the sacredness of his trust, but because, when they examined the situation at their leisure, it seemed that to accept Dixon's offer was the shortest way to achieve their soul's desire. If things went well, she was to go out to him in a year's time.

And when, some months later, Angus called at 307 Pike Street, to find that the boarding-house had changed hands again since Mrs. Cresswell had taken it, being now in a rapid decline under the direction of a drunken proprietor who had been too apathetic to reply to the cable (Angus saw it lying on the shabby hall table among a litter that reminded him of the country post office), he shrugged his shoulders, patted his hip pocket with a nervous movement that was becoming habitual to him, and decided that he had done everything that was humanly possible. Sarah Browning had gone to Auckland, New Zealand, about eighteen months earlier. More than that the fuddled proprietor of the Pike Street boarding-house could not or would not tell him.

So Angus set his face toward his new work and toward the making of his fortune and the great day when his sweetheart should join him in the new world. He did not know that he was snapping his fingers at Fate, and that Fate had responded to the insult with a contemptuous smile.

It would be a mistake, however, to credit Fate or the spirit of Fuller Herbert with the entire control of Angus's career in Sydney. Even if he had never received that arduous commission of his, he would almost certainly have come to grief over the Dixon job. Muller, the manager of the works, was too clever for Angus's straight-

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forward habit; and Muller, from the first, had decided that he had no use for this young emissary from England. Muller played his own game with discretion and foresight, outwitting and outpointing the simple honesty of Whitley, from his preliminary explanation (apparently a frank and, considering his position, a generous statement) of the firm's affairs, to the day, five months later, when, with a well-assumed reluctance, he handed to Angus his month's notice of dismissal.

So far, I cannot trace any direct interference with Angus's fortune, but there can be no question that the result would have been different if he had been a free man. For the truth is that from the day he abandoned his pursuit of Sarah Browning at the door of the Pike Street boarding-house he was, in some indefinable way, haunted. He would pause in the conduct of the most intricate undertaking, bewildered with the sudden sense of an important duty recently overlooked, of a vast and overwhelming responsibility, incredibly, almost criminally, forgotten. Then the thing would take him with a shock of horror, so that he would stand startled and aghast, searching his mind for a memory of the essential duty culpably omitted. At other times the suggestions came to him vaguely, distracting his attention from his work, with cloudy thoughts of some object in life that was greater and finer than his petty preoccupation with the details of his chosen profession. At those moments he would pause, whatever he was doing, and stare blankly before him, as though his eyes were strained to see, through the semblances of his material surroundings, the figure of the obsessing purpose that would drive him through the world in the pursuit of the self-confident, capable woman whose fortune rested so securely in his hip pocket. Only by a great effort of will could he return to his work, cursing Sarah Browning, the diamonds, and the memory of Herbert's commission. But Muller would

note those fits of abstraction and make use of them.

And the haunting steadily persisted, presently adding another cause of discomfort to Angus's life. For it seemed that he was subconsciously aware of the written word 'Auckland' long before his eye could pick it out from a printed page. Whenever he took up *The Sydney Bulletin* he found himself constrained to hunt for that one name, and he could fix his attention on nothing else until he found it. Also, in the street, he would suddenly pause in his walk and look up to discover perhaps a bill of steamer sailings, or it might be the name of a café, but in either case the prominent word that had hailed him so stridently through the deepest abstraction was always that one word 'Auckland'.

Nevertheless, nearly five weeks elapsed after his dismissal from the Dixon works, and, having sent the greater part of his salary home to Devonshire, he was sinking rapidly toward the social stratum of the beach-comber, before he signed on as assistant engineer on the Sydney and Auckland packet. He had not, even then, surrendered his will to the power that was driving him across the world. He was merely relaxing into a condition of helplessness and apathy. He felt that luck was against him; that he would never make good, never marry that girl in Devonshire who so steadfastly and magnificently loved him. He went to Auckland rather because the name so persistently haunted him, than because he had the least hope of fulfilling his 'sacred trust'. It is certainly more than a little remarkable that from the moment he left Sydney his obsession by the word Auckland finally left him.

He had a few hours' leave in the course of the boat's forty-eight hours' stay in port, and he went up to one of the better hotels in the town on the off-chance of getting news of Herbert's heiress. He got it without difficulty. Sarah Browning had never served in that particular

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house; she had been desk clerk at the Imperial, the swell place behind the town, but she was remembered. She had left Auckland, however, 'oh, twelve months or more', Angus's informant told him. 'Went to America, to better herself.'

Angus went up to the Imperial and discovered that Miss Browning's last known address was 'The Mountjoy', San Francisco. He also learned from the cynical male clerk who had succeeded her that 'Sally' had expressed her intention of marrying an American millionaire.

He had not made up his mind, then, to devote all his energies to that absurd quest after the fugitive heiress. The thought of it increasingly bothered him; it came between him and his every purpose, but no more than if it had been the memory of some rather important letter he ought to have written. It was the famous south-easterly gale that settled him. It is still talked about in Auckland. Incidentally, that gale wrecked Angus's packet, which turned turtle thirty miles out from land and drove him back in the company of a capsized lifeboat to his point of departure. He was in hospital for three weeks, and in that time he had leisure to think things over. He reviewed his past from the moment of Herbert's death, and in his weak state he came to believe that the hand of destiny lay heavily upon him and that he would know neither security nor peace of mind until he had delivered Herbert's diamonds to Sally Browning. And once he had got that idea into his head, his duty became an obsession with him. He retarded his recovery by his eagerness to set about the business at once and be done with it. In his quieter moments he still argued with himself, maintaining that no one could expect him to devote his whole life to the casual service that had been so unwarrantably thrust upon him, but his superstition had become stronger than any logic.

When I met him about fifteen months later in New

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York he had the eyes and the bearing of a fanatic. During the interval he had been 'working his way' round the world. He had been in San Francisco and Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Chicago. He had served on tramp steamers, done odd jobs in the cities, 'jumped the cars', and been near to total destitution once or twice, while he made his furious pilgrimage on the trail of the enterprising Sally Browning, who in her vigorous exploration of the road to wealth seemed to have been inspired by a mad desire to fly from the fortune that was so desperately pursuing her.

He had lost track of her in Chicago. She had left there under some kind of a cloud, and with a misplaced and, as it turned out, unnecessary ingenuity had obliterated her traces. For seven months Angus had earned his living in Chicago as a lift-boy, waiting impatiently for the clue that had come to him at last through the chance conversation of two passengers in his lift. At the sound of Sarah Browning's name the attentive lift-boy had suffered a transformation that must have considerably astonished his two passengers. He had stopped the lift between floors while he demanded particulars. He was no longer a servant, but a fanatic pilgrim who cared nothing for any man on earth if he could but fulfil his quest. Had he just found the clue to the finding of a quarter of a million dollars instead of the clue to getting rid of them, he would not have shown a tenth part of the excitement. I gather that he got his information without any hesitation. Perhaps that instinctive movement of the hand to his hip pocket had been misread? As a mark of gratitude he deposited his informants on their proper floor, and then left the building and, an hour later, Chicago, without further ceremony.

He ought to have caught Sally Browning in New York. He had, as it were, short-circuited her trail, for she had been West again in the interval, and if he had

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had enough money for his car-fare he would have found her before she sailed for Liverpool. As it was, he jumped a freight, got hung up on a side-track, and missed her by twenty-four hours. When I met him he had just signed on as a fireman in a White Star boat.

I tried to dissuade him from that ignominy, but he seemed quite unable to give me his attention, refusing my offer to lend him the amount of his second-class fare, as if I were putting some tricky impediment in his way. I did not know then what was driving him, and I remember wondering whether he had committed a crime and was flying from justic. He had much the air of a man haunted by terror and charging in panic through the least hint of obstruction. I could not be expected to guess that the lure which drew him was the longing to deliver himself of a fortune in diamonds to Mrs. Sarah Fulton at the Savoy Hotel in London. She had married her millionaire two days before she left New York, and had taken him to Europe for their honeymoon. The passengers in Angus's lift had been discussing her wedding when he had overheard them. The strange thing was that he should not have heard of her engagement earlier; but his prosecution of the quest had not led him to study the New York journals.

He has told me that he received his first real shock in the discharge of his precious mission when he spoke to the suspicious attendant across the counter in the Savoy foyer. He entered the place with no particular hope of reaching the end of his journey. The habit of asking for Sally—almost exclusively in the halls of hotels—had so grown upon him that he never anticipated anything but the usual reply. So far as he had thought about it at all, he had thought it probable that the Fultons had gone to Paris, to Geneva, to Rome, to Moscow. He may have had visions of following them by the Trans-Siberian Railway to China and Japan. He was certainly prepared

to do that if necessary. He had discarded every other impulse but this dogged pursuit of a fixed idea. And when the attendant told him that Mrs. Fulton was not only staying at the Savoy, but was at that very moment in the hotel, Angus was staggered. In a single moment he had to recast all his values. He was like a blind man who, having patiently worked in darkness all his life, suddenly receives the gift of sight and does not know what to do with it.

‘Have you got a message for her?’ the attendant asked, with a look of disgust at Angus’s clothes. He had, as a matter of fact, forgotten to change them since he emerged from the stoke-hold of the liner.

The familiar sense of impediment braced him again. ‘A message?’ he repeated. ‘By hell! yes, I’ve got a message for her.’ And his hand went back with its habitual movement to the little bulge in his hip pocket.

The attendant backed. ‘What name?’ he asked, looking round for help.

‘Angus Whitley,’ was the reply, spoken as if that, to Mrs. Fulton, unknown name was a combination to conjure with. ‘You let her know I’m here,’ he added, and, turning away from the counter, threw himself in his oil-stained canvas into one of the luxurious armchairs of the Savoy foyer.

They probably sent up his name to Mrs. Fulton, because they did not know what to do with him. Why she consented to see him is a deeper mystery. But Sarah Browning had much strange history behind her, and she may have thought it best, in those early days of her marriage, to be reasonably cautious. Her husband was out just then, and she hoped, no doubt, to deal with the intruder and get rid of him before Fulton returned. If he represented some less creditable episode in her moving past, he might, she probably imagined, be rapidly and easily bought. For all Sarah’s history that had been, in

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a sense, doubtful, was solely connected with finance. Since that one strange affair of hers with Herbert, ten years earlier, she had, as she might have phrased it, 'kept herself respectable'. A little shuffling of accounts, such as she had been guilty of in Chicago, did not, in her opinion, impeach her cherished reputation for virtue.

So she gave directions that he was to be shown up to her sitting-room, and to my mind the queerest aspect of the whole affair is the change that came over Angus when, at last, he realised that his goal was achieved. He had perhaps three or four minutes in which to grasp that fact while he followed the supercilious but distinctly nervous flunkey through long passages and then up in the lift to the sixth floor. And his realisation breaking, now, into a clear retrospect of his tremendous Odyssey, showed him, as he said, that he had been 'a most almighty fool'.

One enormous question posed itself to the extinction of all other issues. 'Why,' he asked himself, 'had he not got rid of the diamonds and kept the money for himself?' He had only one answer; he had never thought of it. The possibility had, quite simply, never occurred to him. And at that eleventh hour it seemed to him that he had missed the chance of his life. He was, by instinct and habit, an honest man, but in his tremendous reaction he cursed himself for his stupidity. He even contemplated the theft as still possible. As he stepped out of the lift on the sixth floor he was reviewing the possibilities of turning back, of hiding himself in London, and disposing of Sarah's diamonds—at however great a loss—to some 'fence' in the East End. Sheer inertia carried him on to Mrs. Fulton's room; that and his natural curiosity to see the woman whose life history had been his single study for more than two years. And when he actually faced her the temptation passed. From the moment he entered Sarah's presence he recovered his sanity. The Angus Whitley of that interview was the Angus who had sailed hopefully

enough from Cape Town in the autumn of '96. For the first time he was able to see the humour of the immense undertaking into which he had been so curiously led.

Mrs. Fulton must not be judged too hardly for her share in the culminating scene of Angus's tragic comedy. He began with an obvious but unfortunate reference to Fuller Herbert. With his return to sanity had come also a return of his appreciation of ordinary values; and he was intensely conscious of himself, he says, as being so absurdly 'improbable', sprung out of nowhere in his stoker's outfit, and appearing in an elaborate hotel sitting-room, with no other credential than a bag of uncut diamonds. No one, least of all the practical Mrs. Fulton, could be expected to believe in so unlikely an apparition. And then he must needs open with that unhappy reference to Herbert, Sally's one slip from virtue. Inevitably she scented blackmail from the outset.

'You've made some mistake,' she said, with decision. 'I've never known anyone of that name.'

'It's a long time ago,' Angus admitted, with the natural but utterly misguided intention of proving his case. 'Ten years or more. At Halton in Northamptonshire. You were in service at the Rectory.'

Mrs. Fulton's face expressed contempt. 'You've made some mistake, young man,' she said. 'I've never heard of the place.'

For one moment he was staggered by her self-assurance. Was it possible, he wondered, that he had picked up the wrong trail, between Chicago and New York; that there were two Sarah Brownings, and that, after all his travail, he had found the wrong one?

'Were you ever at the Central in Chicago?' he asked, testing his clues.

Mrs. Fulton showed a faint shade of disconcertion. It may have flashed through her mind that this queer stranger was a representative of Pinkerton's, that he had

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ferreted out her complete history, and that it might be as well to come to terms at once. She had little fear of the results of the Chicago affair; that was nothing more than a question of financial settlement.

'I may have been. Why?' she asked.

'And at the Mountjoy, 'Frisco?' he continued.

'I was—for a time. Why?' snapped Mrs. Fulton.

Angus heaved a long sigh of relief. This was, at all events, the right Sarah Browning. 'Why? Oh, it's a long story,' he said. 'You've taken two years out of my life.'

Sally's eyebrows went up, but her expression was entirely non-committal.

'Let's cut the story,' Angus said, desperately, and produced the little leather bag from his hip pocket. 'The essentials are that Fuller Herbert thought he had ruined you. He was crazy to make reparation, and he died on the boat coming home from South Africa. He made his will and all that, but he hadn't mentioned you in it for fear of his family making a fuss, so he handed over this bag of diamonds to me to give to you. He—he made it a 'sacred trust'; and I've followed you clean round the world to discharge it. It's taken me, as I said, rather more than two years.' He paused a moment, watching the cautious, reserved face of the still incredulous Sally, and then emptied the contents of the bag on to the table in front of her.

Mrs. Fulton regarded the diamonds with infinite suspicion.

'What's that?' she asked, pointing to a little bundle of papers that had come out of the bag with the stones.

'The official certificates for the diamonds—to prove that they were not bought illicitly, you know,' Angus explained. But the certificates were so soaked with seawater as to be practically illegible.

Sarah pursed her handsome mouth and steadfastly declined to touch either the stones or the papers.

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'You're sure they *are* diamonds?' she asked.

'Quite sure,' Angus returned, grimly.

'Where are you staying?' she said, and continued: 'I think there must be some mistake. I never knew anyone called Fuller Herbert. But if you'll leave the diamonds here I'll have them tested to see if they are genuine, and if they are I'll write to you.'

Angus wondered whether she was momentarily stirred to a thought of generosity; if she suffered a fugitive impulse to send him ten shillings for his trouble?

'I'm not staying anywhere,' he said. 'Write to me Poste Restante at the General Post Office. My name is Angus Whitley.'

It seemed a good moment to get out, but Herbert's heiress checked him at the door.

'What about the bag?' she asked. 'Aren't you going to leave that?'

'No, by God! I'll keep the bag!' Angus replied. 'As—as a reward.'

'Very well,' Sally returned, calmly generous.

He has that bag still. It is one of his favourite jokes to produce it and to ask a new acquaintance how much he thinks that little leather bag is worth. His own answer is, 'Two years of my life'. But, then, as a successful man, happily married, he can afford to laugh now at his amazing Odyssey; just as in his security he can afford to attribute the change of his fortunes to luck. For, as he marched into the Strand, with his head up, a free and, as he protests, at that moment a supremely happy man, he met Dixon, who had been looking for him for eighteen months, and now found him for the second time by a happy coincidence.

But I am not sure. I feel that the little leather bag represents far more than Whitley thinks when he jokingly says 'Two years of my life'. I believe that those two years of his were not, as he implies, wasted. They brought him

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strength of purpose, powers of endurance, and much experience.

Nor can I convince myself that luck or chance was the final arbiter of his wanderings. The coincidences seem to me too many and too marked for that explanation. For my own part, I prefer to believe that the spirit of Fuller Herbert was always at Whitley's elbow during that long probation of his; that it could not seek its rest until it had achieved its perfectly futile purpose of reparation.

I must add a final paragraph to note that Angus never called at the General Post Office for Sarah Fulton's promised letter, so we shall never know whether or not it contained a postal order for ten shillings—the probable limit of her generosity. Also to say that he did once meet her again, twelve years later, at a great reception in a famous London house. She did not, of course, recognise him, and he did not think it tactful to recall their last interview; but he swears that the magnificent and now famous tiara she was wearing was composed of the stones that he had once carried round the world in his hip pocket.

BY
G. K. CHESTERTON



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IT was doubtless a strange coincidence that the two friends, the Frenchman and the Englishman, should have argued about that particular subject on that particular morning. The coincidence may perhaps appear less incredible to a philosophic mind, if I add that they had argued about that subject every morning through the whole month of the walking tour that they took in the country south of Fontainebleau. Indeed, it was this repetition and variety of aspect that gave the more logical and patient mind of the Frenchman the occasion of his final criticism.

‘My friend,’ he said, ‘you have told me many times that you can make no sense of the French duel. Permit me the observation that I can make no sense of the English criticism of the French duel. When we discussed it yesterday, for instance, you twitted me with the affair of old Le Mouton with that Jew journalist who calls himself Vallon. Because the poor old Senator got off with a scratch on the wrist, you called it a farce.’

‘And you can’t deny it was a farce,’ replied the other stolidly.

‘But now,’ proceeded his friend, ‘because we happen to pass the Château d’Orage, you dig up the corpse of the old count who was killed there, God knows when, by a vaga-

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bond Austrian soldier of fortune, and tell me with a burst of British righteousness that it was a hideous tragedy.'

'Well, and you can't deny it was a tragedy,' repeated the Englishman. 'They say the poor young countess couldn't live there in the shadow of it, and has sold the château and gone to Paris.'

'Paris has its religious consolations,' said the Frenchman, smiling somewhat austere. 'But I think you are unreasonable. A thing cannot be bad because it is too dangerous or too safe. If the duel is bloodless you call our poor French swordsman a fool. If it end in bloodshed, what do you call him?'

'I call him a bloody fool,' replied the Englishman.

The two national figures might have served to show how real is nationality, and how independent it is of race; or at least of the physical types commonly associated with race. For Paul Forain was tall, thin and fair, but French to the finger-tips, to the point of his imperial or the points of his long, narrow shoes, and in nothing more French than in a certain seriousness of curiosity that lifted his brow in a permanent furrow; you could see him thinking. And Harry Monk was short, sturdy and dark, and yet exuberantly English—English in his grey tweeds and in his short brown moustache; and in nothing so English as in a complete absence of curiosity, so far as was consistent with courtesy. He carried the humour, and especially the good humour, of the English social compromise with him like a costume; just as one might fancy his grey tweeds carried the grey English weather with him everywhere through those sunny lands. They were both young, and both professors at a famous French college—the one of jurisprudence, the other of English; but the former, Forain, had specialised so much in certain aspects of criminal law that he was often consulted on particular criminal problems. It was certain views of his about murder and manslaughter that had led to the recurrent disagreement about

the duel. They commonly took their holidays together, and had just breakfasted at the inn of the Seven Stars half a mile along the road behind them.

Dawn had broken over the opposite side of the valley and shone full on the side on which their road ran. The ground fell towards the river in a series of tablelands like a terraced garden, and on the one just above them were the neglected grounds and sombre façade of the old château, flanked to left and right by an equally sombre façade of firs and pines, deployed interminably like the lost lances of an army long fallen into dust. The first shafts of the sun, still tinged with red, gleamed on a row of glass frames for cucumbers or some such vegetables, suggesting that the place was at least lately inhabited, and warmed the dark diamonded casements of the house itself, here and there turning a diamond into a ruby. But the garden was overgrown with clumps of wood almost as accidental as giant mosses, and somewhere in its melancholy maze, they knew, the sinister Colonel Tarnow, an Austrian soldier, since not unsuspected of being an Austrian spy, had thrust his blade into the throat of Maurice d'Orage, the last lord of that place. The park descended, and the view over the hedge was soon shut out by a great garden wall so loaded with ivies and ancient vines and creepers that it looked itself more like a hedge than a wall.

'I know you've been out yourself, and I know you're far from being a brute yourself,' conceded Monk, continuing the conversation. 'For my own part, however much I hated a man, I don't fancy I should ever want to kill him.'

'I don't know that I did want to kill him,' answered the other. 'It would be truer to say I wanted him to kill me. You see, I wanted him to be *able* to kill me. That is what is not understood. To show how much I would stake on my side of the quarrel—hallo! What on earth is this?'

On the ivied wall above had appeared a figure, almost

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black against the morning sky, so that they could see nothing of its face, but only its one frenzied gesture. The next moment it had leapt from the wall and stood in their path, with hands spread out as if for succour.

‘Are you doctors, either of you?’ cried the unknown. ‘Anyhow, you must come and help—a man’s been killed.’

They could see now that the figure was that of a slim young man whose dark hair and dark clothes showed the abrupt disorder only seen in what is commonly orderly. One curl of his burnished black hair had been plucked across his eye by an intercepting branch, and he wore pale yellow gloves, one of which was burst across the knuckles.

‘A man killed?’ repeated Monk. ‘How was he killed?’

The yellow-gloved hand made a despairing movement.

‘Oh, the wretched old tale!’ he cried. ‘Too much wine, too many words, and the end next morning. But God knows we never meant it to go so far as this!’

With one of the lightning movements that lay hidden behind his rather dry dignity, Forain had already scaled the low wall and was standing on it, and his English friend followed with equal activity and more unconcern. As soon as they stood there they saw on the lawn below the sight that explained everything, and made so wild and yet apt a commentary on their own controversy.

The group on the lawn included three other men in black frockcoats and top hats, excluding the messenger of misfortune, whose own silk hat lay rolled at random by the wall over which he had leapt. He seemed to have leapt it, by the way, with an impetuosity that spoke of a swift reaction of horror or repentance, for Forain noticed, only a yard or two along the garden wall, a garden door, which, though doubtless disused, rustily barred and blotched with lichen, would have been the natural exit of a more normal moment. But the eye was very reasonably riveted on the two figures, clad only in white shirts and trousers, round whom the rest revolved, and who must have crossed

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swords a moment before. One of these stood with the rapier still poised in his hand, a mere streak of white, which a keen eye might have seen to end in a spot of red. The other white-shirted figure lay like a white rag on the green turf, and a sword of the same pattern, a somewhat antiquated one, lay gleaming in the grass where it had fallen from his hand. One of his black-coated seconds was bending over him, and as the strangers approached lifted a livid face, a face with spectacles and a black triangular beard.

‘It’s too late,’ he said. ‘He’s gone.’

The man still holding the sword cast it down with a wordless sound more shocking than a curse. He was a tall, elegant man, with an air of fashion even in his duelling undress; his face, with a rather fine aquiline profile, looked whiter against red hair and a red pointed beard. The man beside him put a hand upon his shoulder and seemed to push him a little, perhaps urging him to fly. This witness, in the French phrase, was a tall, portly man with a long black beard cut as if in the square pattern of his long black frockcoat, and having, somewhat incongruously, a monocle screwed into one eye. The last of the group, the second of the slayer’s formal backers, stood motionless and somewhat apart from the rest—a big man, much younger than his comrades, and with a classical face like a statue’s and almost as impassive as a statue’s. By a movement common to the whole tragic company, he had removed his top hat at the final announcement, as if at a funeral, and the effect gave to English eyes a slight shock; for the young man’s hair was cropped so close and so colourless that he might almost have been bald. The fashion was common enough in France, yet it seemed incongruous to the man’s youth and good looks. It was as if Apollo were shaved as an Eastern hermit.

‘Gentlemen,’ said Forain at last, ‘since you have brought me into this terrible business, I must be plain. I

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am in no position to be pharisaic. I have all but killed a man myself, and I know that the riposte can be almost past control. I am not,' he added, with a faint touch of acidity, 'a humanitarian, who would have three men butchered with the axe of the guillotine because one has fallen by the sword. I am not an official, but I have some official influence; and I have, if I may say so, a reputation to lose. You must at least convince me that this affair was clean and inevitable like my own, otherwise I must go back to my friend and innkeeper of the Seven Stars, who will put me in communication with another friend of mine, the chief of police.'

And without further apology, he walked across the lawn and looked down at the fallen figure, a figure peculiarly pathetic because plainly younger than any of the survivors, even his second who had run for help. There was no hair on the pale face; the hair on the head was very fair and brushed in a way which Monk, with a new shock of sympathy, recognised as English. There was no doubt of the death; a brief examination showed that the sword had been sent straight through the heart.

The big man with the big black beard broke the silence in reply:

'I will thank you, sir, for your candour, since I am, in some melancholy sense, your host on this occasion. I am Baron Bruno, owner of this house and grounds, and it was here at my table that the mortal insult was given. I owe it to my unfortunate friend Le Caron'—and he made a gesture of introduction towards the red-bearded swordsman, 'to say it was a mortal insult, and followed by a direct challenge. It was a charge of cheating at cards, and it was clinched by one of cowardice. I mean no harshness to the dead, but something is due to the living.'

Monk turned to the dead man's seconds. 'Do you support this?' he demanded.

'I suppose it's all right,' said the young man with the

yellow gloves. 'There were faults on both sides.'

Then he added abruptly: 'My name is Waldo Lorraine, and I'm ashamed to say I am the fool who brought my poor friend here to play. He was an Englishman, Hubert Crane, whom I met in Paris, and meant, heaven knows, only to give a good time! And the only service I've done him is to be his second in this bloody ending. Dr. Vandam here, being also a stranger in the house, kindly acted as my colleague. The duel was regular enough, I must fairly say, but the quarrel was——' He paused, a shadow of shame darkening his dark face. 'I have to confess I was no judge of it, and have no memory but a sort of nightmare. In plain words, I had drunk too much to know or care.'

Dr. Vandam, the pale man in the spectacles, shook his head mournfully, still staring at the corpse.

'I can't help you,' he said. 'I was at the Seven Stars, and only came in time to arrange for the fight.'

'My own fellow-witness, M. Valence,' observed the baron, indicating the man with the cropped hair, 'will ratify my version of the dispute.'

'Had he any papers?' asked Forain after a pause. 'May I examine the body?'

There was no opposition, and, after searching the dead man and his waistcoat and coat that lay on the lawn, the investigator at last found a single letter, short but confirmatory, so far as it went, of the story told him. It was signed 'Abraham Crane', and was plainly from the dead man's father in Huddersfield; indeed, Monk was able to recognise the name as that of a noted manufacturing magnate in the north. It merely concerned business on which the young man had been sent to Paris, apparently to confirm some contract with the Paris branch of the firm of Miller, Moss & Hartman; but the rather sharp adjuration to avoid the vanities of the French capital suggested that perhaps the father had some hint of the dissipations that had brought the son to his death. One thing only in this

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very commonplace letter puzzled the inquirer not a little. It ended by saying that the writer might himself be coming to France to hear the upshot of the Miller, Moss & Hartman affair, and that if so he would put up at the Seven Stars and call for his son at the Château d'Orage. It seemed odd that the son should have given the address of the very place where he was living the riotous life his father so strongly condemned. The only other object in the pockets besides the common necessities was an old locket enclosing the faded portrait of a dark lady.

Forain stood frowning a moment, the paper twisted in his fingers; then he said abruptly: 'May I go up to your house, Monsieur le Baron?'

The baron bowed silently; they left the dead man's seconds to mount guard over his body, and the rest mounted slowly up the slope. They went the slower for two reasons—first, because the steep and straggling path was made more irregular by straggling roots of pine like the tails of dying dragons, and slippery with green slime that might have been their own green and unnatural gore; and second, because Forain stopped every now and then to take what seemed needless note of certain details of the general decay. Either the baron had not long been in possession of the place, or he cared very little for appearances.

What had once been a garden was eaten by giant weeds, and when they passed the cucumber frames on the slope Forain saw they were empty and the glass of one of them had a careless crack, like a star in the ice. Forain stood staring at the hole for nearly a minute.

Entering the house by the long French windows, they came first on a round outer room with a round card-table. It might by the shape have been a turret-room, but seemed somehow as light and sunny as a summer-house, being white and gold in the ornate eighteenth-century style. But it was as faded as it was florid, and the white

had grown yellow and the gold brown. At the moment this decay was but the background of the silent yet speaking drama of a more recent disorder. Cards were scattered across the floor and table, as if flung or struck flying from a hand that held them; champagne bottles stood or lay at random everywhere, half of them broken, nearly all of them empty; a chair was overturned. It was easy to believe all that Lorraine had said of the orgy that now seemed to him a nightmare.

'Not an edifying scene,' said the baron, with a sigh, 'and yet I suppose it has a moral.'

'It may appear singular,' replied Forain, 'but in my own moral problem it is even reassuring. Given the death, I am even glad of the drink.'

As he spoke he stooped swiftly and picked up a handful of cards from the carpet.

'The five of spades,' he said to Monk musingly in English, 'the five of swords, as the old Spaniards would say, I suppose. You know "spade" is "espada", a sword? The four of swords—spades, I mean. The three of spades. The—have you got a telephone here?'

'Yes—in another room, round by the other door of the house,' answered the baron, rather taken aback.

'I'll use it, if I may,' said Forain, and stepped swiftly out of the card-room. He strode across a larger and darker *salon* within, which for some reason had remained in a sterner and more antiquated style of decoration. There were antlers above him; a glimmer of armour showed on the gloom of oak and tapestry, and he saw one thing that arrested his eye as he strode towards the farther door. A trophy of two swords crossed was on one side of the fireplace, and on the corresponding place opposite the empty hooks of another. He understood why the two rapiers had seemed to be antiquated. Under the ominous empty hooks stood an ebony cabinet carved with cherubs as grotesque as goblins.

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Forain felt as if the black cherubim were peering at him with a curiosity quite unangelic. He gazed a moment at the drawers of the cabinet, and passed on.

He shut the door behind him, and they heard another door close in a more distant part of the building, away towards the road that ran on the remoter side of the house. There was a silence; they could hear neither the bell nor the talk at the telephone.

Baron Bruno had dropped the glass from his eye, and was plucking a little nervously at his long dark beard.

‘I suppose, sir,’ he said, addressing Monk, ‘we can count on your friend’s feeling of honour?’

‘I am certain of his honour,’ said the Englishman, with the faintest accent on the possessive pronoun.

The surviving duellist, Le Caron, spoke for the first time, and roughly.

‘Let the man telephone,’ he said. ‘No French jury would call this miserable thing murder. It was almost an accident.’

‘One to be avoided, I think,’ said Monk coldly.

Forain had reappeared, and his brow was cleared of its wrinkle of reflection. ‘Baron,’ he said, ‘I have resolved my little problem. I will treat this tragedy as a private misfortune on one condition—that you all meet me and give me an account that satisfies me within this week, and in Paris. Say outside the Café Roncevaux on Thursday night. Does that suit you? Is that understood? Very well, let us return to the garden.’

When they went out again through the French windows the sun was already high in heaven, and every detail of the slope and lawn below glittered with a new clarity. As they turned the corner of a clump of trees and came out above the duelling-ground, Forain stopped dead and put on the Baron’s arm a hand that caught like a hook.

‘My God!’ he said. ‘This will never do. You must get away at once.’

‘What?’ cried the other.

‘It’s been quick work,’ said the investigator. ‘The father’s here already.’

They followed his glance down to the garden by the wall, and the first thing they saw was that the rusty old garden door was standing open, letting in the white light of the road. Then he realised that a few yards within it was a tall, lean, grey-bearded man, clad completely in black and looking like some Puritanic minister. He was standing on the turf and looking down at the dead. A girl in grey, with a black hat, was kneeling by the body, and the two seconds, as by an instinct of decency, had withdrawn to some distance and stood gazing gloomily at the ground. In the clear sunlight the whole group looked like a lighted scene on a green stage.

‘Go back at once—all three of you,’ said Forain almost fiercely. ‘Get away by the other door. You must not meet *him*, at least.’

The Baron, after an instant’s hesitation, seemed to assent, and Le Caron had already turned away. The slayer and his two seconds moved towards the house and vanished into it once more, the tall young man with the shaven head going last with a leisure that made even his long legs look cynical. He was the only one of them who scarcely seemed affected at all.

‘Mr. Crane, I think,’ said Forain to the bereaved father. ‘I fear you know all that we can tell you.’

The grey-bearded man nodded; there was a certain frost-bitten fierceness about his face and something wild in the eye contrasting with the control in the features, something that seemed natural enough at such a time, but which they found afterwards to be more normal to him even in ordinary times.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘I have seen the end of cards and wine and the Lord’s judgments for everything I feared.’ Then he added, with an incongruous simplicity somehow rather

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tragic than comic: 'And fencing, sir. I was always against all that French fad of getting prizes for fencing. Football is bad enough, with betting and every sort of brutality, but it doesn't lead to this. You are English, I think?' he said abruptly to Monk. 'Have you anything to say of this abominable murder?'

'I say it is an abominable murder,' said Monk firmly. 'I was saying so to my friend hardly half an hour ago.'

'Ah, and you?' cried the old man, looking suspiciously at Forain. 'Were you defending duels, perhaps?'

'Sir,' replied Forain gently, 'it is no time for defending anything. If your son had fallen from a horse, I would not defend horses; you should say your worst of them. If he had been drowned in a boat, I would join you in wishing every boat at the bottom of the sea.'

The girl was looking at Forain with an innocent intensity of gaze which was curious and painful, but the father turned impatiently away, saying to Monk: 'As you are English at least, I should like to consult you.' And he drew the Englishman aside.

But the daughter still looked across at Forain without speech or motion, and he looked back at her with a rather indescribable interest. She was fair, like her brother, with yellow hair and a white face, but her features were irregular with that fairy luck that falls right once in fifty times, and then is more beautiful than beauty. Her eyes seemed as colourless as water, and yet as bright as diamonds, and when he met them the Frenchman realised, with a mounting and unmanageable emotion, that he was facing something far more positive than the laxity of the son or the limitations of the father.

'May I ask you, sir,' she said steadily, 'who were those three men with you just now? Were they the men who murdered him?'

'Mademoiselle,' he said, feeling somehow that all disguises had dropped, 'you use a harsh word, and heaven

knows it is natural. But I must not stand before you on false pretences. I myself have held such a weapon and nearly done such a murder.'

'I don't think you look like a murderer,' she said calmly. 'But they did. That man with the red beard, he was like a wolf—a well-dressed wolf, which is the worst part of it. And that big, pompous man—what could he be but horrible, with his big black beard and a glass in one eye?'

'Surely,' said Forain respectfully, 'it is not wicked to be well dressed, and a man might be more sinned against than sinning and still have a beard and an eyeglass.'

'Not all that big beard and that one little eyeglass,' she replied positively. 'Oh, I only saw them in the distance, but I know quite well I'm right.'

'I know you must think any duellist is a criminal and ought to be punished,' said Forain rather huskily. 'Only, having been one myself—'

'I don't,' she said. 'I think those duellists ought to be punished. And, just to prove what I mean and don't mean—and her pale face was changed with a puzzling and yet dazzling smile—'I want you to punish them.'

There was a strange silence, and she added quietly:

'You have seen something yourself. You have some guess, I am sure, about how they came to fight, and what was really behind it all. You know there is really something wrong, much more wrong than the quarrel about cards.'

He bowed to her, and seemed to yield like a man rebuked by an old friend.

'Mademoiselle,' he said, 'I am honoured by your confidence. And your commission.'

He straightened himself equally abruptly, and turned to face the father, who had drawn near again in conversation with Monk.

'Mr. Crane,' he said gravely, 'I must ask you for the

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moment to trust me. This gentleman, as well as other countrymen of yours to whom I can refer you, will, I think, tell you that I can be trusted. I have already communicated with the authorities, and you may even regard me in a sense as their representative. I can answer for the fact that those responsible in this dreadful affair are under observation, and that justice can effect whatever may be found to be just. If you will honour me with an appointment in Paris after Tuesday next, I can tell you more of many things that you ought to know. Meanwhile, I will make any arrangements you desire touching the—formalities of respect for the dead.'

The eye of old Crane was still choleric, but he bowed, and Forain and Monk, returning the salutation, retraced their way up the path to the château. As they did so the Frenchman paused again by the cucumber frame and pointed to the broken glass.

'That's the biggest hole in the story so far,' he said; 'it gapes at me like the mouth of hell.'

'That!' exclaimed his friend. 'That might have happened any time.'

'It happened this morning,' said Forain, 'or else—anyhow, the broken bits are fresh; nothing has grown round them. And there is the mark of a heel on the soil inside. One of these men stepped straight on to the glass going down to the duelling ground. Why?'

'Oh, well,' observed Monk, 'that fellow Lorraine said he was blind drunk last night.'

'But not this morning,' replied Forain. 'And though a man blind drunk, even in broad daylight, might conceivably put his foot into a big glass frame right in front of him, I doubt if he could take it out again so neatly. If he were as drunk as that, I think the man-trap would trip and throw him, and there would be more broken glass. This does not look to me like a man who was blind drunk. It is more like a man who was blind——'

'Blind!' repeated Monk, with a quite irrational creeping of the flesh. 'But none of these men are blind. Is there any other explanation?'

'Yes,' replied Forain. 'They did it in the dark. And that is the darkest part of the business.'

Anyone who had tracked the course of the two friends on the ensuing Thursday evening, when dusk had already kindled around them the many-coloured lights of Paris, might have imagined that they had no purpose but the visiting of a variety of cafés. Yet their course, though crooked and erratic, was designed according to the consistent strategy of the amateur detective. Forain went first to see the countess, the still surviving widow of the nobleman who fell fifteen years before in a duel on the same spot. He went in a literal sense to see her, and not to call on her. For he contented himself with sitting outside the café opposite her house and playing with an *apéritif* until she came out to her carriage—a dark-browed lady, with a beauty rather fixed like a picture than still living like a flower: a portrait from a mummy-case. Then he merely glanced at the portrait in the old locket he had taken from the dead man's pocket, nodded almost approvingly, and made his way across the river to a less aristocratic and more purely commercial part of the town. Passing rapidly along a solid street of banks and public buildings, he reached a large hotel built on the same ponderous pattern, but having the usual litter of little tables on the pavement outside. They were intersected with ornamental shrubs and covered with an awning striped with white and purple, and at a table at the extreme corner, against the last green afterglow of evening, he saw the black bulk of Baron Bruno sitting between his two friends. The awning that shaded them just cut off the upper part of his tall black hat, and Monk had the fancy that he resembled some black Babylonian caryatid supporting the whole building;

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perhaps there was something Assyrian about his large square beard. The Englishman felt a subconscious temptation to share his country-woman's prejudice, but it was evident that Forain did not share it. For he sat down with the three men, and began to exhibit a very unexpected camaraderie and even conviviality. He ordered wine and pressed it upon them, passing afterwards into animated conversation, and it was not until about half an hour afterwards that our imaginary spectator, hovering on his trail, would have seen him start up with a slight return to stiffness, salute the company and resume his singular journey.

His zigzag course through the lighted city carried him first to a public telephone and then to a public office, which Monk was able to identify as the place where the dead body was awaiting medical examination. From this place he came out looking very grim, like one who has faced an ugly fact, but he said nothing and pursued his course to the police headquarters, where he was closeted for some time with the authorities. Then he crossed the river once more, walking swiftly and still in silence, and in a quiet corner of Paris struck the worn white gateway of a building that had once been an hotel in the ancient and aristocratic sense, and was now an hotel in a more commercial but particularly quiet fashion. Passing through the porch and passages, he came out on a garden so secluded that the very sunset sky seemed a private awning of gold and green like the awning of purple and silver under which the sombre baron had sat. A few guests in evening dress were scattered at tables under the trees, but Forain went swiftly past them to one table near a flight of garden steps, at which he could see a girl in grey with golden hair. It was Margaret Crane; she looked up as he approached, but she only said, as if breathlessly: 'Do you know any more about the murder?'

Before he could reply her father had appeared at the

top of the steps, and Forain felt vaguely that while the girl's grey dress seemed to harmonise with everything, the rigid and rusty black of the old man's clothes remained like the protest of a Puritan in a garden of Cavaliers.

'The murder,' he repeated in a loud and harsh voice, heard everywhere: 'That's what we want to know about. This murder, sir!'

'Mr. Crane,' said Forain, 'I hope you know how I feel your position, but it is only fair to warn you that in these criminal matters one must speak carefully. If it comes to a trial, your case will be none the better if you have abused these men at random, even in private. And I am bound to say, not only that the duel as a duel seems to have been regular, but that the duellists seem to be men of marked regularity.'

'What do you mean?' demanded the old man.

'I will be frank with you and own I have seen them since,' said Forain. 'Nay, I have passed a sort of festive evening with them—or what I meant to be a festive evening. But I am forced to say they are as little festive as your own conscience could desire. Indeed, they seem to have business habits very much like your own. Frankly, I tried to make them drink and to draw them into a game of cards, but the baron and his friends coldly declined, said they had appointments, and we parted after black coffee and a brief and rather curious conversation.'

'I hate them the more for that,' said the girl.

'You are quick, Mademoiselle,' observed Forain, with a growing admiration. 'I also took the matter in that spirit, if only for experiment. I said bluntly to our baronial friend: "So long as I thought you were a drinking and a dicing company, I took this for a drunken accident. But let me tell you it does not look well when elderly men, themselves sober, themselves indifferent to play, get a mere boy among them and play cards with him. You know what is thought of that; it is thought that the old

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man takes a hand—well, rather too like an old hand. And it is worse when he silences his opponent by fencing like an old hand also.” ’

‘And what did they say to that?’ asked the girl.

‘It is painful for me to repeat it,’ said Forain, ‘but it is quite as uncomfortable a surprise to me. Just as I seem to have cornered them finally, that red-bearded man, Le Caron, whose sword made the mortal thrust, himself broke in like one abandoning disguise, with impatience and passion. “I respect the dead,” he said, “but you force me from any reticence. I can only tell you it was not we, the elder men, who dragged the boy into drink; it was he who dragged us. He arrived at the château half drunk already, and insisted on the baron ordering champagne from the Seven Stars down the road, for we were a temperate party and the cellar was not even stocked. It was he who insisted on play; it was he who taunted us with being afraid to play; it was he who at last added, quite wantonly and in wild falsehood, the intolerable taunt that we cheated at play.” ’

‘I will not believe it,’ said Crane, but his daughter remained silent, with her pale and penetrating face turned towards the amateur detective, who continued his report of the conversation.

‘“Oh, I don’t ask you to take my word,” Le Caron went on. “Ask Lorraine himself, ask Dr. Vandam himself, who was sent to the inn for the wine, so that he was away when the row occurred. He stopped behind there to settle, and wasn’t sorry, I think, to be out of it. He also, like myself, is glad to be *bourgeois* in these matters. Ask the inn-keeper himself; he will tell you the wine was bought well on in the evening, after the young man arrived. Ask the people at the railway station; they will tell you when the young man arrived. You can easily test my story.” ’

‘I can see by your face,’ said the girl in a low voice, ‘that you have tested it. And you have found it true.’

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'You see the heart of things,' said Forain.

'I cannot see the hearts of these men,' she answered. 'But I can see the hollows where their hearts should be.'

'You still find them horrible,' he said. 'Who can blame you?'

'Horrible!' cried the old man. 'Didn't they murder my son?'

'I speak only as an adviser,' observed the Frenchman. 'I know you cannot believe a duellist could be a respectable man. I only say that, as a fact, these seem to be respectable men. I have not only verified their tale, but traced back something of their past. They seem to have been concerned with commercial things, but solidly and on a considerable scale; I am in touch with the police dossiers, and should know of any other such scandals about them. Forgive me; I fear I do think that a duel is sometimes justifiable. I will not horrify you by saying that this one was justifiable. I only warn you that, in French opinion, they may be able to justify it.'

'Yes,' said the girl. 'They grow more horrible as you speak of them. Oh! that is the really horrible man—the man who can always be justified. Honest men leave more holes gaping, like my poor brother, but the wicked are always in armour. Is there anything so blasphemous as the bad man's case when his case is complete, as the lawyers say; when the judge gravely sums up, and the jury agree and the police obey, and everything goes on oiled wheels? Is there anything so oily as the smell of that oil? It is then I feel I cannot wait for the Day of Judgment to crack their whited sepulchres.'

'And it is then,' said Forain quietly, 'that I fight a duel.'

The girl started a little. 'Then?' she repeated.

'Then,' repeated the Frenchman, lifting his head. 'You, Mademoiselle, have uttered the defence of the good duellist. You have proved the right of the private gentleman to draw a private sword. Yes, it is then that I do this

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criminal and bloody thing that so much horrifies you and your father. Yes, it is then that I become a murderer. When there is no crack in the whitewash and I cannot wait for the wrath of God. And permit me the reminder that you have not yet heard the end of my interview with the men who have left you in mourning.'

Crane still stared in frosty suspicion, but the girl, as Forain suggested, had great intuitions. Her face and eyes kindled as she gazed.

'You don't mean——' she began, and then stopped.

Forain rose to his feet. 'Yes,' he said. 'Being such a bloodthirsty character, I must no longer remain in company so respectable. Yes, mademoiselle, I have challenged the man who killed your brother.'

'Challenged!' repeated the bristling Crane. 'Challenged—more of this—of this butchery!' and he choked. But the girl had risen also and stretched out her hand like a queen.

'No, father,' she said. 'This gentleman is our friend, and he caught me out fairly. But I see now that there is more in French wit than we have understood; yes, and more in French duelling.'

With a heightened colour and a lowered voice, Forain answered: 'Mademoiselle, my inspiration is English.' And, with a rather abrupt bow, he strode away, accompanied by Harry Monk, who regarded him with a contained amusement.

'I cannot affect to hope,' said Monk airily, 'that I myself constitute the English inspiration of your life.'

'Nonsense,' said the other rather testily, 'let us get back to business. As I imagined your views of duelling were so similar to old Crane's that you could not consistently represent me, I've asked his unfortunate son's seconds to act as mine. I believe that young Lorraine will be of great use in helping us to probe this mystery. I have talked to him, and I am convinced of his great ability.'

'And you have talked to me for years,' said Monk,

laughing, 'and you are convinced of my great stupidity.'

'Of your great sincerity,' said Forain. 'That is why I do not ask you to help me here.'

Monk's scruples, however, did not prevent his being present at the new encounter that had been so rapidly and even irregularly arranged. And his travels with his eccentric friend, which had already begun to remind him of the overturns and recurrences of a nightmare, brought him a few days later back to the old duelling ground of the Château d'Orage. The garden of Baron Bruno had apparently been selected for a second time as a sort of concession to the baron's party, but it was rather a grim privilege, and they evidently felt it as such. So little disposed were they, indeed, to linger about the place where they had once feasted and fought, that the baron's motor was waiting in the road without to take them back immediately to Paris. Forain had always vaguely felt that the baron was very tenuously attached to his house and property, and in this case his party seemed to revisit it like ghosts. The prejudice of Margaret Crane would have said that a shadow of doom was visibly closing in on them. But it was more reasonable, and consonant with the more quiet and *bourgeois* character to which they seemed entitled, to suppose that they were naturally distressed at returning to the scene of their one reluctant deed of blood. Whatever the reason, the baron's brown face was heavy and sombre, and Le Caron, when he again found himself standing sword in hand on that fatal grass, was so white that his beard looked scarlet, like false hair or fiery paint. Monk almost fancied that the bright point of the poised rapier was faintly vibrant, as in a hand that shook.

The pine-shadowed park, with its careless and almost colourless decay, seemed a place where centuries might pass unnoticed. The white morning light served only to accentuate the grey details, and Monk caught himself fancying that it was truly the ashen vegetation of prim-

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æval æons. This may have been an effect of his nerves, which were not unnaturally strained. After all, this was the third duel in those grounds, and two had ended in death; he could not but wonder if his friend was to be the last victim. Anyhow, it seemed to him that the preliminaries were intolerably lengthy. Le Caron had long and low-voiced consultations with the lowering baron; and even Forain's own seconds, Lorraine and the doctor, seemed more inclined to wait and whisper than to come to the mortal business. And all this was the more strange because the fight, when it did come at last, seemed to be over in a flash, like a conjuring trick.

The swords had barely touched twice or thrice when Le Caron found himself swordless. His weapon had twitched itself like a live thing out of his hand, and went spinning and sparkling over the garden wall; they could hear the steel tinkle on the stones of the road. Forain had disarmed him with a turn of the wrist.

Forain straightened himself and made a salute with his sword.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I am quite satisfied, if you are. After all, it was a slight cause of quarrel, and the honour of both parties is, so far, secure. Also, I understand, you gentlemen are anxious to get back to town.'

Monk had long felt that his friend was more and more disposed to let the opposite group off lightly; he had long been speaking of them soberly as sober merchants. But whether or no it was the anti-climax of safety, he had a sense that the figures opposite had shrunk, and were more commonplace and ugly. The eagle nose of Le Caron looked more like a common hook; his fine clothes seemed to sit more uneasily on him, as on a hastily-dressed doll; and even the solid and solemn baron somehow looked more like a large dummy outside a tailor's shop. But the strangest thing of all was that the baron's other colleague, Valence, of the shaven head, was standing astraddle in the

background, wearing a broad though a bitter grin. As the baron and the defeated duellist made their way rather sullenly through the garden door to the car beyond, Forain went up to this last member of the strange group, and (much to Monk's surprise) talked quickly and quietly for several minutes. It was only when Bruno's great voice was heard calling his name from without that this last figure also turned and left the gardens.

'*Exeunt brigands!*' said Forain with a cheerful change in his voice, 'and now the four detectives will go up and examine the brigands' den.'

And he turned and began once again to mount the slope to the château, the rest following in single file. Monk, who was just behind him, remarked abruptly when they were halfway up the ascent:

'So you didn't kill him, after all?'

'I didn't want to kill him,' replied his French friend.

'What did you want?'

'I wanted to see whether he could fence,' said Forain. 'He can't.'

Monk eyed in a puzzled manner the tall, straight, grey-clad back of the figure mounting ahead of him, but was silent till Forain spoke again.

'You remember,' continued that gentleman, 'that old Crane said his unfortunate son had actually got prizes for fencing. But that carrotty-whiskered Mr. Le Caron hardly knows how to hold a foil. Of course, it's very natural; after all, he is but a quiet business man, as I told you, and deals more in gold than steel.'

'But, my good man,' cried Monk, addressing the back in exasperation, 'what the devil does it all mean? Why was Crane killed in the duel?'

'There never was any duel,' said Forain, without turning round.

Dr. Vandam behind uttered an abrupt sound as of astonishment, or perhaps enlightenment; but, though it

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was followed by many questions, Forain said no more till they stood in the long inner room of the château, with the weapons on the wall and the ebony cabinet, on which the black cherubs looked blacker than ever. Forain felt more darkly a certain contradiction between their colour and shape, that was like a blasphemy. Black cherubs were like the Black Mass—they were symbols of some idea that hell is an inverted copy of heaven, like a landscape hanging downwards in a lake.

He shook off his momentary dreams and stooped over the drawers of the cabinet, and when he spoke again it was lightly enough.

‘You know the château, Monsieur Lorraine,’ he said, ‘and I expect you know the cabinet, and even the drawer. I see it’s been opened lately.’ The drawer, indeed, was not completely closed, and, giving it a sudden jerk, he pulled it completely out of the cabinet. Without further words he bore it, with its contents, back into the card-room and put it on the round table; and at his invitation his three colleagues or co-detectives drew up their chairs and sat round it. The drawer seemed to contain the contents of an old curiosity shop, such as Balzac loved to describe—a tumbled heap of brown coins, dim jewels and trinkets, of which tales, true and false, are told.

‘Well, what about it?’ asked Monk. ‘Do you want to get something out of it?’

‘Not exactly,’ replied the investigator. ‘I rather fancy I want to put something into it.’

He pulled from his pocket the locket with the dark portrait, and poised it thoughtfully in his hand.

‘We have now to ask ourselves,’ went on the detective to his colleagues, ‘why young Crane was carrying this, which is a portrait of the countess?’

‘He went about Paris a good deal,’ said Dr. Vandam rather grimly.

‘If she knew him well,’ proceeded Forain, ‘it seems

strange she has taken no notice of his sad end.'

'Perhaps she knew him a little too well,' cried Lorraine, with a little laugh. 'Or perhaps, though it's an ugly thing to say, she was glad to be rid of him. There were uglier stories when her husband, the old count——'

'You know the château, Monsieur Lorraine?' repeated Forain, looking at him steadily and even sternly. 'I think that's where the locket came from.' And he tossed it on to the many-coloured heap in the drawer.

Lorraine's eyes were literally like black diamonds as he gazed fascinated at the heap; he seemed really too excited to reply. Forain continued his exposition.

'Poor Crane, I fancy, must have found it here. Or else somebody found it here and gave it to him. Or else somebody—by the way, surely that's a real Renaissance chain there—Italian and fifteenth century, unless I'm wrong. There are valuable things here, Monsieur Lorraine, and I believe you're a judge of them.'

'I know a little about the Renaissance,' answered Lorraine, and the pale Dr. Vandam flashed a queer look at him through his spectacles.

'There was a ring, too, I suspect,' said Forain. 'I have put back the locket. Would you, Monsieur Lorraine, kindly put back the ring?'

Lorraine rose, the smile still on his lips; he put two fingers in his waistcoat pocket and drew out a small circlet of wrought gold with a green stone.

The next moment Forain's arm shot across the table trying to catch his wrist; but his motion, though swift as his sword-thrust, was yet too late. Young Mr. Waldo Lorraine stood with the smile on his lips and the Renaissance ring on his finger while one could count five. Then his feet slipped on the smooth floor and he fell dead across the table, with his black ringlets among the rich refuse of the drawer. Almost simultaneously with the shock of his fall, Dr. Vandam had taken one bound, burst out of the

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French windows and disappeared down the garden like a cat.

'Don't move,' said Forain with a steely steadiness. 'The police are on the watch. I laid them on the other day in Paris when I saw poor Crane's body.'

'But surely,' cried his bewildered friend, 'it was not only then that you saw the wound on his body.'

'I mean the wound on his finger,' said Forain.

He stood a minute or two in silence, looking down at the fallen figure across the table with pity and something almost like admiration.

'Strange,' he said at last, 'that he should die just here, with his head in all that dustbin of curiosities that he was born among and had such a taste for. You saw he was a Jew, of course, but, my God, what a genius! Like your young Disraeli—and he might have succeeded too and filled the world with his fame. Just a mistake or two, breaking a cucumber frame in the dark, and he lies dead in all that dead bric-à-brac, as if in the pawnshop where he was born.'

The next appointment Forain made with his friends was at the office of the *Sûreté*, in a private room. Monk was a little late for the appointment; the party was already assembled round the table, and it gave him a final shock. He was not, indeed, surprised to see Crane and his daughter sitting opposite Forain, and he guessed that the man presiding, with the white beard and the red rosette, was the chief of police himself. But his head turned when he found the fifth place filled with the broad shoulders, cropped hair and ghastly handsome face of Valence, the younger second of Le Caron.

Old Crane was in the middle of a speech when he entered, and was speaking with his usual smouldering and self-righteous indignation.

'I send my son to execute a deed of partnership in a good business with Miller, Moss and Hartman, one of the

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first firms in the civilised world, sir, with branches in America and all the colonies, as big as the Bank of England. What happens? No sooner does he set foot in your country than he gets in a dicing, drinking, duelling gang, and is butchered in a barbarous brawl with drawn swords.'

'Mr. Crane,' said Forain gently, 'you will forgive me if I both contradict you and congratulate you. Given so sad a story, I give you the gladdest news a father could hear. You have wronged your son. He did not drink, he did not dice, he did not duel. He obeyed you in every particular. He devoted himself wholly to Messrs. Miller, Moss and Hartman; he died in your service, and he died rather than fail you.'

The girl leaned swiftly forward, and she was pale but radiant.

'What do you mean?' she cried. 'Then who were these men with swords and hateful faces? What were they doing? Who are they?'

'I will tell you,' answered the Frenchman calmly. 'They are Messrs. Miller, Moss and Hartman, one of the first firms in the civilised world, as big as the Bank of England.'

There was a silence of stupefaction on the other side of the table, and it was Forain who went on, but with a change and challenge in his voice.

'Oh, how little you rich masters of the modern world know about the modern world! What do you know about Miller, Moss and Hartman, *except* that they have branches all over the world and are as big as the Bank of England? You know they go to the ends of the earth, but where do they come from? Is there any check on businesses changing hands or men changing names? Miller may be twenty years dead, if he was ever alive. Miller may stand for Muller, or Muller for Moses. The back-doors of every business to-day are open to such new-comers, and do you ever ask from what gutters they come? And then you

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think your son lost if he goes into a music-hall, and you want to shut up all the taverns to keep him from bad company. Believe me, you had better shut up the banks.'

Margaret Crane was still staring with electric eyes. 'But what in the name of mercy happened?' she cried.

The investigator turned slightly in his chair and made a movement, as of somewhat sombre introduction, towards Valence, who sat looking at the table with a face like coloured stone.

'We have with us,' said Forain, 'one who knows from within the whole of this strange story. We need not trouble much about his own story. Of the five men who have played this horrible farce, he is certainly the most honest, and therefore the only one who has been in prison. It was for a crime of passion long ago, which turned him from being at worst a Lothario to being at worst an Apache. Hence these more respectable ruffians had a rope round his neck, and to-day he is not so much a traitor as a runaway. If on that hideous night he held a candle to the devil, he is no devil-worshipper; at least he has little worship for these devils.'

There was a long silence, and the stony lips of the shaven Apollo curled and moved at last. 'Well,' he said, 'I won't trouble you with much about these men I had to serve. Their real names were not Lorraine, Le Caron, etc., any more than they were Miller, Moss, etc., though they went by the first in society and the second in business. Just now we need not trouble about their real names; I'm sure they never did. They were cosmopolitan moneylenders mostly; I was in their power, and they kept me as a big bully and bodyguard to save them from what they richly deserved at the hands of many ruined men. They would no more have thought of fighting a duel than of going on a crusade. I knew something of the countess, who has nothing to do with the story, except that I got them a short lease of her house. One evening Lorraine, who was the leader and the

cleverest rascal in Europe, young as he was, happened to be turning over the drawer of curios, which he had taken out of the black cabinet and put on the round card-table. He found the old Italian ring, and told us it was poisoned; he knew a lot about such toys. Suddenly he made a momentary gesture covering the drawer, like a fence when he hears the police. He recovered his calm; there was no danger, but the gesture told of old times. What had produced it was a man who had appeared silently, and was standing outside the French windows, having entered up the garden slope. He was a slim, fair young man, carefully dressed and wearing a silk hat, which he took off as he entered. "My name is Crane," he said a little stiffly and nervously, and plucked off his glove to offer his hand, which Lorraine shook with great warmth. The others joined in the greeting, and it gradually became apparent that this was the representative of some firm with whom they were to make an important amalgamation. In the entrance-room all was welcome and gaiety, but when young Crane had followed old Bruno into the big inner room, leaving his hat and gloves on the card-table by the curios, I fancy things did not go so smoothly. I did not understand the business fully, but I was watching the three others who did, and I came to the conclusion that Bruno, in their name, was making some proposition to the new junior partner which they regarded as a very handsome proposition for him, but which he did not regard as altogether handsome in other respects. They seemed quite confident at first, but as the talk went on in the inner room Vandam and Le Caron exchanged gloomy glances; and suddenly a full, indignant voice came from within: "Do you mean, sir, that my father is to suffer?" and then, after an inaudible reply, "Confidential, sir! The confidence, I imagine, is placed by my father in me. I shall instantly report this astounding proposal. . . . No, sir, I am not to be bribed." I was watching Lorraine's face, that

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seemed to have grown old as a yellow parchment, and his eyes glittered like the old stones on the table. He was leaning across it, his mouth close to the ear of Vandam, and he was saying: "He must not leave the house. Our work all over the world is lost if he leaves this house." "But we can't stop him," whispered the doctor, and his teeth chattered. "Can't!" repeated Lorraine, with a ghastly smile, yet somehow like a man in a trance: "Oh, one *can* do anything. I never did it before, though." He picked the poison ring out of the heap. Then he swiftly drew the young man's glove out of his hat on the table. There came a burst of speech from the inner room: "I shall tell him you are a pack of thieves!" and Lorraine quietly slipped the ring inside a finger of the glove, a moment before its owner swung into the room. He clapped on his hat, furiously pulled on his gloves, and strode to the French windows. Then he flung them open wide upon the sunset, stepped out and fell dead on the garden turf beyond. I remember his tall hat rolling down the slope, and how horrible it seemed that it should still be moving among the bushes, when he lay so still.'

'He died like a soldier for a flag,' said Forain.

'Perhaps you have already guessed,' went on Valence, 'the rest of the story. Hell itself must have inspired Lorraine that night, for the whole drama was his and worked out to the last detail. The difficulty in every murder is how to hide the corpse. He decided not to hide it, but to show it: I might say to advertise it. He had been striding up and down the inner hall, his flexible face working with thought, when his eye caught the crossed swords on the trophy. "This man died in a duel," he said. "In England he'd have died out duck-shooting, and in Russia of dynamite. In France he died in a duel. If we all take the lighter blame, they will never look for heavier; it's a good rule with confessions," and again he wore that awful smile. He not only staged the duel, but the drunken quarrel that

was to explain it. They were quite right when they said the champagne was not sent for till after the boy's arrival. It was not sent for till after the boy's arrival. It was not sent for till after his death. They carefully scattered cards, carefully threw furniture about and so on. By the way, they didn't shuffle the packs enough to deceive Monsieur Forain. Then they put Le Caron—the showiest—in his shirt-sleeves, did the same with the dead man, and then Lorraine deliberately passed the sword through the heart that had already ceased to beat. It seemed like a second murder, and a worse one. Then they carried him down in the dark, just before the dawn, so that no one could possibly see him save on the fighting ground. Lorraine thought of twenty little things; he took an old miniature of the countess from the cabinet and put it in the dead man's pocket, to put people off the scent—as it did. He left Mr. Crane's letter, because its warning against dissipation actually supported the story. It was all well fitted together, and if Le Caron hadn't put his foot on a cucumber-frame in the dark I doubt if even Monsieur Forain would ever have found a hole in the business.'

Margaret Crane walked firmly out of the offices of the *Sûreté*, but at the top of the steps outside she wavered and might almost have fallen. Forain caught her by the elbow, and they looked at each other for a space; then they went down the steps and down the street together. She had lost a brother in that black adventure, and what else she gained is no part of the tale of the five strange men, or, as she came to call it afterwards, the five of swords. Margaret asked one more question about it, and their talk afterwards was of deeply different matters. She only said: 'Was it the wound you discovered on his finger that made you certain?'

'Partly his finger,' he assented gravely, 'and partly his face. There was something still fresh on his face that made me fancy already that he was no waster, but had died more

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than worthily. It was something young and yet nobler than youth, and more beautiful than beauty. It was something I had seen somewhere else. In fact, it was the converse, so to speak, of the case in Rostand's play, "*Monsieur de Bergerac, je suis ta cousine.*" '

'I don't understand you,' she said.

'It was a family likeness,' replied her companion.

BY
GILBERT FRANKAU



MUSTARD-POT—MATCHMAKER

I

‘**M**y dear Victor, why not admit that you funked the place—and let it go at that?’ Naomi Braunston flicked the lash of her heavy hunting-whip scientifically at a twig in the leafless hedgerows, re-coiled the thong round her hand, and trotted off—rising squarely as a man from her man’s saddle—into the gathering twilight.

For a moment, her companion thought to follow. Then, changing his mind, he walked his tired roan on up the hill. A flush deep as the mud-flecked scarlet of his hunting-coat mantled his wind-tanned cheeks. Under the auburn of the cropped moustache, his fine teeth bit hard on the lower lip. His eyes, steel-blue beneath the black rim of the high silk hat, were the eyes of a shamed schoolboy.

And perhaps it *was* schoolboyish for a man of thirty-eight with Victor’s service record to take such a remark seriously. But when you happen to have been born in the very centre of that particular England which folk call ‘The Shires’; when, from the hour you first straddled a Shetland pony no bigger than the stable mastiff to the day you came back, twice wounded and four times decorated, from the conquered Rhine, everything you thought worth living for (and fighting for, and, if necessary, dying for) has been comprised in the three syllables of the

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word 'fox-hunting'; when you're 'damned if you know what to do with yourself' from the time of the 'stinking violets' to the time when the 'dahlias are dead'; when the only music you love is the high note of hounds breaking covert on a breast-high scent, and all the pictures you care to see are the pictures a man may espy from the back of a mettlesome horse as he follows the speeding pack; when, all about you, for forty hard-riding miles on either side, neither man, woman, nor child worries if you be lord or steeplechase jock, poet or profiteer, so long as you go straight at your fences and don't gallop more than absolutely necessary over Farmer Thompson's wheat; and when—in addition to all these things—you happen to be Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Victor Plowright Lomondham, Baronet, Royal Horse Artillery (retired), of Lomondham Hall, Leicestershire, and Charles Street, Mayfair, with thirty thousand pounds a year inherited income, a moderate conceit of yourself, and an immoderate desire to share hearth and home with your neighbour's daughter Naomi—then, quite conceivably, you allow that kind of remark, especially from her, to rankle.

Besides—and this was the worst of it—the remark happened to be true. Victor Lomondham—as he now admitted to his private soul—*had* funk'd not only the particular place of which Naomi spoke, a double-oxer with a nastyish ditch on the take-off side and a still nastier one on the landing, but half a hundred other leaps during the last half-dozen weeks. Ever since the opening meet of the season—to be perfectly frank with himself—he had been 'going like a pair of boots'. Something, some Peculiar Thing, seemed to have got him by the pit of the stomach. To-night, riding at a snail-pace toward the lights of his home, Lomondham knew, for the first time, that the name of that Peculiar Thing must be 'Fear'.

And at that he thought, grimly, 'Afraid! Me! Good God, this won't do—this won't do at all.' It seemed, you

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see, almost incredible that, after five years of warfare—years during which, inwardly, he had so often scoffed at others ‘getting the wind up’—Fear should have singled *him* out, in the hunting-field of all places, for its victim. ‘*I am* afraid,’ he thought. ‘I’m scared stiff of my own gee-gees.’

The roan, as though in confirmation of his master’s newly-acquired self-knowledge, stumbled—sending the rider’s heart into his mouth. Lomondham damned the beast, damned himself for his injustice (no horse stumbles on purpose), and so came past the lodge-gates of Lomondham Hall, round the drive, and into the great quadrangle of his stables. As he dismounted, a boy ran to take the horse, and Walters, the stud-groom—a burly, clean-shaven worthy who had been in the Lomondham’s service all his life—approached with touched cap and a deferentially cheerful: ‘How did it go after the change, Sir Victor?’

‘Pretty fair, thanks, Walters.’ Lomondham stamped his booted feet on the gravel, and the pair of them followed the tired nag under the stable archway—for the habits of the Regular Army are not lightly discarded, nor was the master of Lomondham Hall one of those who leave the care of their horses to underlings, however trustworthy those underlings may appear.

II

Hunting over for the day, his hour in ‘Stables’ had always been Lomondham’s supreme and particular joy. But this evening—and weariness, even after the hardest galloped run, was rare with him—he felt weary, almost too weary to make his usual round. Yet the physical fatigue in him seemed paltry when compared with the mental unease.

Breaking one of his own stable-rules, he lit himself a

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cigarette, and began to pace—the silent stud-groom at his elbow—disconsolately down the red-brick-floored, electric lit corridors, opening each door as he came to it, entering here, merely peering in there, while the rugged occupants of the odorous stalls stamped and whinnied to his known approach.

Two dozen first-class hunters there were at Lomondham Hall—as fine a string as the poorest hunting-man ever dreamed of in his poverty; and master and stud-groom visited two-and-twenty of them, from Quicksilver, the chestnut pony with the white stockings, who had leaped Little Overdine Brook clean from poached bank to poached bank on the day when Farmer Thompson's cart-horses and tackle-chains had worked till dusk dragging bogged thoroughbreds from the mire, past the two gray Arabs, Selim and Ali, whose tails stuck up like gigantic ostrich-feathers, and whose actions were smooth as a cat's canter over turf, to the slim seventeen-hand Nigger Princess, with her ears bent wickedly backwards, the whites of her eyeballs gleaming and her hind hoofs itching to lash out at the visitors.

It was on Nigger Princess—quiet as a lamb once mounted, but a devil unleashed in stables—that Victor, just before 'change of horses', had funked the 'place' of which Naomi spoke; and he stood watching the mare for a long while, wondering whether she, too, realised her master's cowardice.

'About to-morrow, Sir Victor?' interrupted Walters, anxious for his tea.

'Selim and Ali's turn, ain't it? I shan't need the car——'

Lomondham stopped, chewing at his moustache. To-morrow, thank the Lord! would be an easy day—the meet practically at his own gates, the country known to a post, Selim and Ali rides for a baby.

'Very good, Sir Victor.' Walters, his duties almost over for the day, made a slight movement towards the last two

loose-boxes, from one of which came the hiss and scrape of the stable-boy cleaning the roan. But his master halted him with a sharp, 'Walters! Did you have Mustard-Pot shod this morning?'

'Yes, Sir Victor.'

'Good. I'll have a look at him.'

Master, a vague idea simmering at the back of his mind, and man, concealing his annoyance, made their way to the end loose-box of all, clicked on the light, opened the high grilled door, and passed in.

The first peculiarity which struck the observer's eye about Mustard-Pot was his colour; the next his size. Stripped of his rugs, the enormous horse, standing prehistoric in the glare of the naked light-bulb above his manger, shewed as near butter-yellow as a steed can be and live. In build, he might have been model to some equine sculptor of the gigantically symbolic. Judging from the slope of his huge shoulders, from the set of his lean pasterns, from the muscled swell of his gaskins, and the sinuous perfection of his hocks, any man might have said to himself—as Lomondham had said when he bought him, preternaturally cheap at a little-frequented show: 'Here is the leaper of the world!'

And as a fact, in cold blood, over schooling-fences or the bar, Mustard-Pot could have held his own, and more than his own, with a kangaroo. As a show-jumper, he had no equal; as a hack, his paces and his temper were no less perfect than his appearance was bizarre. It was only in the hunting-field—and possibly on the steeplechase course, though Victor, who at that period of his life hated racing, had never tried the experiment—that Mustard-Pot became entirely unmanageable. Whether, according to stable-legend, the animal had circus-blood in him, and could only perform in a ring; whether he suffered from that obscure human complaint known as 'crowd-panic'; or whether, in the words of Tom Sampey, the Little Over-

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dine horse-breaker whom he had brought back white and shaking like a leaf after a three-mile bolt up and down the stiffest country in the Vale of Screever, 'The trouble with him is that he's got a nose like a hound and follows scent on his own'—appeared to Mustard-Pot's owner, as he ground one spurred heel pensively into the clean peat-moss litter, the most unprofitable of speculations. Remained, as solid certainty, only the fact that if—instead of Selim—he rode the yellow horse on the morrow, nobody, not even Naomi, could accuse him of funk.

'I think I'll give the Arabs a day off,' he said tersely. 'We'll make it Mustard-Pot first, Quicksilver second'; and leaving the stud-groom to astonished speculation and the re-rugging of the horse, strode off.

III

The dwelling-house of Lomondham Hall, a vast brown-stone pile, tall of chimney-stack and mullioned of window, backed by the great oaks and green rides of Lomondham Wood, and fronted, mile upon mile, by the terracing down-sweep of Lomondham Vale, is separated from the stables by a good three hundred yards of gravel drive and shrubbery—distance enough, if a man take it slowly, for him to change his mind more than once. But Victor, having given his order to the stud-groom, did not turn back.

He came—a tall, powerful figure, the last person in the world one would have suspected of 'nerves'—between the tall opal lights either side the open front door, up the steps, and into the big square galleried hall. There he handed his hat, his gloves, and his hunting-whip to his waiting valet; sank into his big chair by the blazing fire; permitted himself to be served with tea and muffins from massive Georgian silver; patted his rough-haired terrier with a firm capable hand; and thereafter went up the

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balustered staircase to his own particular bathroom as coolly as any other millionaire aristocrat without a care in the world save his own enjoyment.

Yet, inwardly, Sir Victor Plowright Lomondham, of Lomondham Hall, knew himself all one shivering apprehension. Dressing for dinner, in the beamed Tudor bedroom, he remembered the Biblical phrase, 'His bowels turned to water'; and found it amazingly applicable to the morrow. Dining, alone with his gloomy pictured ancestors, the men-servants manœuvring like trained shadows behind his back, it seemed to him that the rich foods were tasteless, that the rich wine soured in his mouth. In the smoking-room—his dinner over, a whisky-and-soda at his elbow and a cigar between his teeth—he fell to wondering why, for the past month, he had never invited a guest.

Then he grew introspective; and in this mood of introspection, a mood never before experienced, he thought, suddenly, 'I'm lonely, the most damnably lonely fellow in the world.'

From which—and this, perhaps, furnishes the Freudian diagnosis that a psycho-analyst, had Sir Victor ever dreamed of consulting one, would have made of his mental condition—the baronet's thoughts switched, longingly, to Naomi. Vividly and acutely he visualised her—the long lithe limbs, breeched knees gripping saddle, booted feet thrust home in the stirrup irons; the broad shoulders and the deep bosom which the riding-coat hid without concealing; the hands capable as his own; the fine little head, beclustered with darkling tresses; the eyes, big and jet-black under jet-black brows; and the red ripe fulness of those lips which had said to him: 'You funk'd the place—let it go at that.'

Followed, hot on the heels of this sudden vision, a rage of self-questioning. Even admitting that he had 'got the wind up' in the hunting-field, what the devil difference

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did that make to his marrying Naomi? Hadn't hundreds, thousands of other men been forced—sooner or later—to give up riding in the 'first flight'? Didn't a man's nerve, naturally, break down when he reached a certain age? Weren't there cases of steeplechase jockeys, fellows cool as cucumbers in the sugar-my-neighbour leap-and-gallop between the flags of a marked and prepared course, who didn't dare—simply didn't dare—ride straight to hounds across a couple of miles of cut-and-laid and ridge-and-furrow? Didn't a chap's nerve come back, come back quite miraculously, if only he took a really good toss over timber? And, finally—finally, wouldn't Naomi, the very moment she saw him on Mustard-Pot, realise that her taunt had been unjust, and apologise for it?

That imagined apology, you see, was the real crux of the whole business. Lomondham had been on the verge, on the very verge of proposing. But a man, a man of his temperament and outlook, couldn't very well propose to a girl who—who had the whip-hand of him. In matrimony as in life, you see, the master of Lomondham Hall must be top-dog; capable of controlling his woman as of controlling his staff and his gee-gees. 'I'll ride the brute,' he muttered. 'I'll ride the brute if I break my neck.'

Many a fox-hunter, by the way, has broken his neck for far less reason!

IV

Lomondham, according to custom, left the smoking-room at half-past ten to the tick; dismissed his valet at ten-forty-five; got into bed at five minutes to eleven—and never slept a wink till four. Alternately, through the long restless hours, Naomi, Nigger Princess, and Mustard-Pot haunted him; and when at last he did sleep, the yellow horse galloped through his dreams—dreams in which he heard himself praying, voicelessly, to the heedless gods

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of the chase, for a frost severe enough to stop hunting for ever and ever, amen. Morning, however, brought neither frost nor storm; but a grayly perfect winter's day, almost warm and with hardly a breath of wind.

Morning, too, brought its mental reaction; so that it seemed to Naomi's lover, sitting down spurred and scarlet-clad to his ample breakfast, as though the night had never been. His mood of the moment was sheer recklessness—that particular kind of recklessness which is so often mistaken for true courage. He thought, a little bombastically: 'I'll shew that saffron quadruped, I'll shew Naomi Braunston, who is master.'

And this mood of swaggering recklessness—a mood as foreign to the real poised Lomondham as the introspection of the night before—endured all through breakfast-time, all through his post-breakfast cigar and his half hour with his newspaper in the bow-windowed library, right up to the very moment when—at ten-thirty to the second—Mustard-Pot's big hoofs halted on the gravel drive. Then, abruptly, 'nerves' once more had their way with him.

Neither his hands, as—his gleaming silk hat well down on his head—he took his buckskin gloves and his short-handled long-thonged whip from his man; nor his white-breeched, top-booted legs—as he stood on the broad steps looking down at the saddled horse—actually trembled; yet, to prevent them from trembling took every ounce of his self-control. He wanted to say to Walters, whose curiosity had not been able to resist the temptation of allotting himself the post of second horseman for the day, and who was even now wondering whether he should ask permission or simply go back to the stables and bring Quicksilver on: 'I've changed my mind.' He wanted to tell the stable-boy at the horse's head: 'Take that brute away; and bring Selim round as quickly as ever you can.'

Instead, he went silently down the broad stone steps; gentled the steady yellow muzzle; cast a quick eye over

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girthing and bridling; let out a link of the burnished curb-chain; thrust his foot into the iron; swung himself to saddle with a terse, 'You needn't hold his head as if he were going to eat you, lad,' to the stable-boy; gave Walters his orders about Quicksilver—and set off down the drive as though the curious domestic heads peering from the various windows did not exist.

All the same, when Mustard-Pot—apparently the gentlest creature ever foaled—stepped out daintily between the lodge-gates, Mustard-Pot's rider felt acutely self-conscious. With his terror—for now that he was actually astride that vast butter-coloured back, only terror describes his emotion—mingled a peculiar pride. For the first time in his life he wanted, not merely to do things for the pleasure of doing them, but so that others, and more particularly Naomi, should be witnesses of his accomplishment.

Nor were spectators lacking to gratify the want! Already, a mile from Lomondham Ruffs, immaculate limousines occupied by immaculate sportsmen, fat farmers in grunting Fords, slim farmers' wives in smart traps, grooms with two horses and grooms with one, men in red frock-coats and men in black cut-aways, bowler-hatted girls astride and top-hatted women on side-saddles, boys on ponies and graybeards on cobs, folk on foot and folk on push-bikes, came crowding along the road and along the grass at roadside.

But soon, Lomondham's thoughts were all for his horse. The great horse, already conscious of the chase, had pricked his ears. His neck arched to the reins. He tossed at his bit. His clipped skin twitched and twitched. His gentle walk became an amble; his amble a hand-canter. Checked, he began to dance among the crowd. The crowd scattered. The foot-folk drew to hedge-side. A hunting-mother shepherding two flapper daughters cursed 'that ass of a Lomondham, who ought to know

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better than to bring that ass of a horse into the hunting-field.'

Lomondham—his terror momentarily in abeyance—managed to simmer the dancer down just as Naomi on a big gray, accompanied by her father on a fat dun, trotted slowly out of the bridle-path from Little Lomondham on to the high-road.

She greeted him easily: 'Good morning, Victor. So Tom Sampey managed to break Mustard-Pot for you, did he? I'm so glad. He is a topper.' Her father said: 'Hallo, Lomondham. Going to give us all a lead, what?'

The master of Lomondham Hall looked at the big black-eyed, black-moustached landowner, at his tall black-eyed, black-tressed daughter; and answering, 'Yes, it's a good thing we've broken him to hounds at last,' wondered what the devil *would* happen when hounds actually appeared.

Then Mustard-Pot began dancing again, and he had no time to think, no opportunity to observe that quick flash of apprehensive understanding in Naomi's eyes.

V

Half-an-hour later, from the western edge of Lomondham Ruffs—a twenty-acre patch of gorse through which the green rides cut straight as cricket-pitches—three hundred horsemen and horsewomen listened to the shrill music of hounds in covert, listened for the twang of the silver horn and the loud 'Gone away' which signals a fox departed. But the three-hundred-and-first horseman listened not at all.

Mustard-Pot, at first sight of the pack jig-jogging up the road, had been mad enough; now, hearing them, he seemed to have gone utterly crazy. The gentle hack had disappeared; in its place was a snorting, plunging, rearing, buck-jumping, pig-jumping saffron maniac whose one

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idea seemed to be to fling his rider out of the saddle and join the hounds on his own. Lomondham, wrenching at the near reins as a man wrenches at the tiller of a racing-yacht, had just managed to draw away from the rest of the field; and was still managing—though every leap of the crazed animal sapped a little more of his strength—to hold him from bolting into the gorse.

Curiously enough, the rider's terror had disappeared. Clinging—thigh, knee and calf—to the smooth ox-hide; cursing—as only hunting-men can curse—at the back of Mustard-Pot's heedless ears; giving him every inch of rein he dared, yet conscious that the inch too much would mean disaster; swaying to him as he spun like a top; leaning back to him as he buck-jumped, and forward, feet scarcely touching the irons, as he reared—he thought only: 'Why don't the fox break? Why the devil don't he break?'

Love, pride, self-consciousness—all these, as well as terror, had momentarily taken wing from Lomondham's mind. Momentarily he was just a horseman; fighting for mastery; feeling—with each pitched second—that mastery at ebb from his hands and body; feeling the demon under him grow stronger and always stronger to his own weakness; knowing instinctively that his one chance, his one and only chance of ultimate victory, lay in letting Mustard-Pot have his head and gallop till the power went out of his jaw-bones.

The fight went on, till Mustard-Pot, head between fore-legs, hind heels over head, gave one final frenetical buck—and abruptly, from beyond The Ruffs, came the twang-twang of the huntsman's horn, the roared 'Gone away—gone away' of a galloping whipper-in. Then, looking about him in the second of time the end of that buck allowed, Lomondham saw the rest of the field preparing to follow—an orderly stampede of horsemen and horsewomen, thrusters pushing to the front, second-flighters hanging back, wise ones rounding the gorse and weak ones

making for road or bridle-paths—and gave the yellow gelding his head.

It wasn't a case of 'cutting down the field'. Mustard-Pot, once loosed, went past the swiftest of them like a torpedo-boat past fishing-smacks; and as he went—the green turf thudding under him, the black turf flying from his flying heels—panic, the sheer panic of Things Uncontrollable, entered once again into his rider. For, instinctively, Lomondham knew that the fox would make due east for Saxenham; and instinctively—a map of the country beyond the Ruffs flashing through his mind—he tried to steer Mustard-Pot to the right, away from the most dangerous line in all the Vale.

But Mustard-Pot's long-cheeked curb might have been a watering-bridle. Straight for The Ruffs he made—his speed increasing with every gigantic bound; straight across them he went—his rider, feet back, body forward in the saddle—seeing rabbit-holes and bramble slide under and swirl past them as ground slides under and swirls past the mounting 'plane.

And now, as they flew for the far edge of The Ruffs, all hope went from Lomondham. At that pace not even Manifesto could have hoped to come safe across the one stone wall in the Vale, and up the big bank beyond the wall, and down the bank into Tupper's Lane. There was nothing—nothing in all the world to do—save to sit down, and to sit still, and to pray that the fall would throw one clear. As for hounds, fox, whippers-in, or huntsmen—Lomondham had clean forgotten the lot of them.

Mustard-Pot, however, had not forgotten. Mustard-Pot's keen ears heard, away beyond the stone wall his eager eyes had just perceived, the eager music of the pack; and Lomondham, still praying, felt his mad pace check to the take-off; saw the jagged top of the wall racing at him; felt the saddle rise between his thigh-bones, as the horse up-ended for the leap; glimpsed the jagged wall-top

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flash below; knew one danger safely overpast; was conscious of the man-tall bank ahead, of Mustard-Pot hurling himself to top of it, of Mustard-Pot poised for the down-spring, of the green lane below and a gray thoroughbred checking in the lane, of his own back touching Mustard-Pot's croup as they alighted, and of the twelve-foot bullfinch—impenetrable as barbed wire—a bare six inches from his nose.

How horse and rider went through that bullfinch, Naomi, mud-splashed to the eyes, never knew. *She* merely saw Victor's scarlet whip-arm fling up to shield his face, and the yellow horse charge head down at the interlaced thorns, buck his way into them, and disappear to a crashing of wood and a thudding squelch of steel plates among rotten leaves and stagnant water.

As for Lomondham, he could see nothing. He was aware only of a million cats trying to scratch the skin from his face, the clothes from his body, and of a million claws trying to drag him backwards over the cantle. Then—his hat snapped from its cord, his left spur wrenched off its strap, one red coat-tail left in the hedge and the other torn to tatters—he was through and in sight of the pack.

The pack, scoring to cry and so close on each other's sterns that they looked like one hound, were three good fields ahead; the huntsman and a whipper-in, alone in their glory, one.

At sight of them, a little of his nerve came back to Lomondham. The going—uphill across the switchback of deep furrows and high ridges which had been ploughland in Cromwell's day—slowed Mustard-Pot's stride; and glancing over his right shoulder, the rider could see half-a-dozen horsemen pelting to be level with him. He thought, vaguely: 'By gad, that was a short cut with a vengeance. We're giving 'em all a lead.' Then he thought of Naomi's gray, checking in the lane—and shivered in his saddle at the realisation that he might have jumped clean

on top of her.

Followed realisation of the fence ahead—a double post-and-rails with a thorn-filled ditch on the landing side. Mustard-Pot gathered speed again, hurling himself across the ridge-and-furrow. The wind of their going whipped through Lomondham's hair. Fifty yards from the timber he took a pull at his reins. But the yellow horse raced on unheeding, balanced himself in mid-career, and, clearing the obstacle with feet to spare, saw the two scarlet coats ahead.

No holding the lunatic yet! Still uphill, still over ridge and furrow, he tore like a steed possessed. The two scarlet coats were coming back. Back and back! Lomondham tried to steer round them. But the yellow horse held straight on; and shot between the galloping pair, missing them by a hair's-breadth, scattering his clods in their faces. Lomondham heard the huntsman's outraged blasphemy die away down wind as Mustard-Pot took the next post-and-rails in his stride.

And now—now neither hill nor fence nor furrow checked them. For eight hundred yards the ground underhoof was flat as a racecourse. Across that flat ground, hounds and quarry had gone like a flame—gone like a flame over the brow of the rise—gone like a flame for the heart of the Vale. And now desperately—desperately, as though his red nostrils told him the way they had travelled—desperately as a prairie-fire leaps the crackling grasses—Mustard-Pot went after them. No foam flecked his useless bit. No sweat darkled on his striding muscles. He was still fresh—fresh and fearless and strong as the storm. But his rider was still afraid—afraid of the ground to come.

And now, suddenly, they were over the brow of the rise; and now, suddenly, Lomondham saw the Vale below—bad lands dropping terrace-wise through patches of leafless coppice to a gray road, and a brown, smoke-plumed

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village. Beyond these, broad as a river, gleamed the Saxenham Canal. 'Steady, you fool! For God's sake, steady!' roared Lomondham, his shoulders back, his knees iron on the saddle-flaps, his hands iron on Mustard-Pot's curb.

But Mustard-Pot heeded not a whit. Mustard-Pot saw only the hounds—the towling-rowling hounds that poured like a cascade of black-white-and-tan down the slope of the Vale.

Ensued fantastic seconds—seconds of slip and slide and scramble, of plunge and stumble and miraculous recovery—seconds when it seemed to the horseman as though no power on earth could keep him from pitching yards over that enormous down-stretched yellow neck—seconds when the head, neck, and shoulders reared up like a giraffe's before his eyes as Mustard-Pot glissaded fifty sheer yards on his tail—seconds when the loose iron-stone of the hillside rained like shrapnel from their hoofstrokes—seconds when the tree-roots tip-tilted them at every bound—seconds when it seemed as though they left solid earth and flew, flew for dear life down the whistling void.

Down Mustard-Pot went, and down, scrambling over good land, scrambling over bad, scrambling over stone-heaps, scrambling through ditches, scrambling over fences, scrambling among tree-trunks, scrambling his rider's heart in his mouth as a servant-girl scrambles eggs in a pan.

Yet, even so, hounds gained on horse. Hounds made the Saxenham road and flashed left along the grass at roadside five hundred yards clear ahead of the pair plunging like a scarlet and yellow plummet down Saxenham Hill. Hounds saw their fox streak dark across the gray road and swing away from the brown, smoke-plumed village, just as Mustard-Pot—sweating at last—crashed through the young larch plantation at hill-foot and paused for the hundredth part of an instant, his ears cocking to their joyous music.

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Lomondham, his face white as his hunting-stock, the sweat blinding his blue eyes, was too blown to take advantage of that instant's pausing; and before he could shorten rein, Mustard-Pot had leaped out of the plantation—into the road—over the road—up the bank and through the hedge on to ridge-and-furrow again.

One minute later, Saxenham Village, turning out to a man, cheered one hatless horseman over the 'squire-trap' into Farmer Thompson's paddock. Two minutes later, Saxenham Village, turning out to a boy, called, 'Yes, sir. Yes, m'lady. That way, sir. That way, m'lady,' to the scattered field who came, pounded and pounding, after him. Three minutes later, Saxenham Village, dashing, every mother's son and daughter of it, through the churchyard and up the slope behind, saw the dog-fox lolloping red across the chocolate loam that hid Farmer Thompson's winter wheat, and howled to Naomi Braunston as she galloped by, 'You keep to the left, missie. He's making for the canal.'

Taking the far hedge of the paddock, Lomondham—a little of the breath back in his body and a few of his wits back in his mind—wondered how much longer the horse under him could keep on bolting. He even began to wonder whether the horse were actually bolting. Mustard-Pot, for all that he refused to answer the reins, seemed to know his business. Foam-flecked, he still went straight as a railway-train. Nothing stopped him—neither the stile they cleared to a rap of steel horseshoes on sodden plank—nor the double-oxer with the ditch beyond—nor the five-foot cut-and-laid on to the new-sown corn. And 'God help Thompson's wheat to-day', thought Lomondham, as they hared across it close behind the crazy hounds. Then he, too, heard voices howling, 'You keep to the left, sir. He's making for the canal.'

Before the meaning of those voices penetrated to the hatless horseman on the foam-flecked horse, Mustard-Pot

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was on turf again, barely a hundred yards behind the pack. But the pack, once off ploughland, had the heels of him. They ran nearly mute now, their sterns straight as ramrods, their hackles up, fury in their eyes, and fire in their blood. For their fox was in view. Their fox sank as he ran—ran gasping for the water they could smell when their blood-frantic eyes lost him.

Lomondham, mute as the pack, watched the beaten fox across the tow-path; saw him tumble over the canal bank; watched hound after hound tumble over after him; remembered the ten-foot drop to the twenty-foot water—and realised in one thrilling spout of superhuman exaltation that all fear had departed from him.

For at last, at good last, the hot dashing courage of Mustard-Pot was into Mustard-Pot's rider. For at last, at splendid last, Sir Victor Plowright Lomondham of Lomondham Hall rode straight again—rode straight and whooping for the kill. 'Holla! Holla! Holla! little bitches,' he whooped—the reins loose on his horse's neck, the huntsman behind him and the canal before.

And at that whoop, indomitably, incredibly, Mustard-Pot cracked on the last ounce of his astounding speed. No need to touch him with whip or spur! The very ground rocked under his drumming hoofs, as, bound on gigantic bound, he hurtled at the hazard.

The mud of the tow-path was fifty yards ahead—twenty—ten. Below it—still rippling to the passage of the pack—gleamed the brown and the desperate water. Beyond—up the bank—toiled the last eager hound. 'Yooi, yooi, yooi to him, Winsome,' whooped Lomondham.

Then he was aware of Mustard-Pot gathering himself as though to clear the moon, of the tow-path dropping away, of brown water scurrying under, of brown water leaping up, of a bombshell splash that flung white fountains high and high above his drowning eyes, and of a Force, a Force enormous and earthquake-like under his

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thighs, driving him up and up through the desperate waters. Then the fountains subsided; and Lomondham knew himself still in the saddle, knew his horse swimming like a sword-fish to be in at the death.

Dripping steed under dripping rider scrambled out of Saxenham Canal and up the far bank of it just in time to see what came in after years to be known as 'Mustard-Pot's Fox' rolled over in the open.

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Mustard-Pot's fox had been torn and eaten a good ten minutes, but belated riders on blown horses were still clattering across the canal-bridges, when Lomondham—his reins over his bridle-arm, the water oozing over the tops of his boots—glanced up at a girl on a gray and remarked, meaningly: 'I'm going to toddle home, Naomi. It looks to me as though Silver Glory's had about enough. You'd better come, too.'

He swung to saddle with a squelch; and the yellow horse, after one regretful glance at the blooded pack, stepped daintily away—Naomi Braunston on a perfectly fit mare following them as obediently as a cavewoman her mate.

Item: Though Silver Glory, who usually grazes with him, seems confident that Lomondham saw something fall from Naomi's hand just at the very moment she confessed, 'Victor, you—you mustn't ride like that again. It frightens me'; Mustard-Pot, from whom I had this first of many tales one summer afternoon as he grazed leisurely among the fragrant grasses of Lomondham Park, assures me that when, on their homeward way, the woman his master eventually married dropped her heavy hunting-whip, neither she nor Victor noticed the symbolism of a proceeding which shocked Silver Glory to the depths of her gray mare-ish soul.

BY

SIR PHILIP GIBBS



THE STRANGER IN THE VILLAGE

THE people of Lubimovka—those few who survived the famine which ravaged the Volga region of Russia in 1920 and 1921—believe firmly to this day that Nicholas, Tsar of All the Russias, was not murdered by Bolsheviks, according to newspaper stories which professed to give full and lurid details of that historic tragedy, but actually came to their village more than a year after he was supposed to be dead, lived among them with humility and love, and left behind him a relic worshipfully revered as proof of his identity.

It is an extraordinary story, and I confess when I heard it first from those Russian peasants and one young poet there, I regarded it merely as a variation of a myth which had been told me in Moscow, and once in a railway train on the way to Kazan, by highly educated Russians. They did not believe that the Tsar was dead. Some of them were convinced, without any evidence that seemed good to me, that he had escaped, or been allowed to escape, from his Bolshevik guards and had become a monk in some remote monastery in Asiatic Russia. Others believed that he was wandering about in peasant garb from one district to another, begging his way, and only revealing himself to trusted friends, most of them in misery or in hiding like himself.

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It seemed to me the beginning of one of those fantastic traditions which spring up in popular imagination when some great personality disappears suddenly from the drama of life in which he played important parts. In the Middle Ages English kings murdered by their enemies, like Richard II or Edward II, were supposed to be alive long after their poor bodies had been buried secretly, and now and again a pretender took advantage of this popular belief. Even in England during the Great War there were thousands of people who refused to believe that Kitchener had been really drowned on the *Hampshire*, and asserted that he was a prisoner in the hands of the Germans. It is no wonder, therefore, that in Russia, with its credulous and simple peasants, there should be a widespread belief that the Tsar, their Little Father as they called him before the revolution, should be still alive.

What is remarkable about the tale of this stranger who came to Lubimovka is the unshakable faith of a young man like the poet Sacha—a sceptic and intellectual—and the apparent self-delusion of the man himself. From everything Sacha tells me it seems probable that this Nicholas Alexandrovitch, as he called himself, confessed that he was the Tsar, or at least did not deny that title, although he had nothing to gain except hunger and death, apart from a mystical power over a few starving peasants. He may have been mad, though his conversation was full of wisdom and sweetness. Certainly he could not have been a common charlatan, for that kind of man does not behave as this man did with simple charity. On the other hand, he may have been—well, I will tell you the story just as it happened and as it was told to me by Sacha the poet, by Sonia the schoolmistress, and by Michael and his wife Anna.

It was in the autumn of 1920, when the first snow had fallen, but before the Volga had frozen up. In the village of Lubimovka, as in all other villages along the Volga

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valley, there were hunger and disease and death and fear. Worse than death was that great fear of the agony ahead and of inescapable doom, as it seemed. Strong peasant men, unafraid of death for themselves—many of them had fought against the Germans in the Great War with a simple and stubborn heroism in the midst of slaughter—trembled and felt their hearts turn to water when they saw their women weak with hunger and their children withering, and could see no hope at all of getting fresh supplies of food when their scanty stores had gone. They could not fight against this death which crept into Lubimovka like a grey wolf, hungry for the little ones and the old people.

It was in the afternoon of a day in middle October that the stranger came to the village. No one saw him enter through the gate in the stockade which surrounded the village according to the old custom of putting up a high fence to keep in the cattle and keep out the wolves. Now in Lubimovka no barrier could keep the wolf from the door—the invisible hunger-wolf—and most of the cattle had already been killed because there was no fodder left to keep the cows alive. The stranger entered by the gate which opens on the road towards Tetiushi. His footsteps made black smudges in the snow that had newly fallen. A peasant girl, staring through the window of a little wooden house facing the village pump—she was praying that death might come quickly to her mother, who lay stricken with typhus on the bed above the stove—saw the man's tall figure walking up the street towards the school-house. He was a bearded man with deep-set eyes which looked very sad, as this girl told Sacha. He wore a sheep-skin coat and military boots, broken at the toes, and he walked like a soldier, with a straight back, but very slowly, as though exhausted after a long march.

The girl was startled by the sight of him, because it was a long time since any stranger had come to Lubimovka,

and instead of men coming to the village many had gone away after the summer when blackened crops stood in the burning sun which that year as well as last had utterly destroyed all hopes of harvest. They had gone away with their wives and children in boats down the Volga, hoping to reach districts where some food was left for winter months. Others had fought to get places on railway trains going towards Moscow, where there was always food according to the old proverb that 'all things roll down to Moscow'. But dreadful stories had come back of those refugee trains and those boatloads of people escaping from famine. It was months before the trains reached Moscow, and many died on the way. On the boats typhus broke out, and people who fled from famine found death in fever. It was better, perhaps, to stay in Lubimovka, and wait for death quietly at home.

But it was strange that an unknown man should come to the village, walking like this in the snow which fell in thick flakes on his sheepskin coat and his ragged fur cap. That peasant girl, Maria, who was the daughter of the blacksmith, Boris Markovitch, had a stupid idea, which she told Sacha, that it was Death himself coming to Lubimovka. She was afraid and yet glad when the man turned his head towards the window from which she was staring out, and looked at her with his sad, kind eyes. 'It is Death calling to me,' she thought, and crossed herself. But he passed on, and she still lived.

It was a hundred yards farther on that the black smudges of his footsteps in the snow came to an end, and it was the peasant Michael who was the next to see this stranger.

Michael had gone out into his yard to see his little cow, which was dying for lack of fodder. He had kept it alive by feeding it on cabbage stalks, which he had hidden in his cellar under a pile of sacks. His neighbours were angry with him because he kept it alive. They said: 'Michael feeds his cow while our children die. He will burn in the

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next world because he cares more for his little cow than for our beautiful innocents who are withering like flowers. He has sold himself to the Devil.'

Michael was afraid of that. Perhaps this love he had for his little cow was unholy and devilish. Perhaps God would punish him because he had given its milk to his own children and not a drop to his neighbours for their starving babes. But how could he share such a little milk with the whole village? He could at least keep his own family alive while the little cow was fed. Better that they should live than that all should die, and as for himself, he did not let a drop pass his lips, but munched only small morsels of bread made of leaves and straw and a few husks. Now there would be no more milk for his wife and the little ones. He had come to the end of his secret hoard of cabbage stalks. It was three days since the little cow had been fed. Its eyes were glazing. He could not bear its pitiful gaze, so full of reproach that he had not the heart to kill it.

It was when he came out of its shed cursing himself because he had not the strength to kill it—it had licked his hand with a hot tongue—that he saw the stranger outside his house in the falling snow, and the long trail of black footsteps behind him. The stranger stood looking up the street, and his lips moved as though he were speaking, but suddenly he lurched sideways like a drunken man, and fell in a heap face downwards in the snow.

Michael stared at him stupidly. Then a kind of anger crept into his brain. What business had this man to die outside his house? Why not stay and die decently in his own home without troubling his neighbours? It was probably that foolish brute, Boris, the blacksmith, who had boasted so often of his great strength until typhus made him as weak as a maiden. The silly boaster! Michael was as strong as he was now, and still alive, though no blacksmith with arms like twisted wire.

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Michael strode towards him sullenly, and then saw that it was not his old enemy the blacksmith, but some stranger. He could see that by the shape and colour of the man's hands. They were not hands that belonged to men of Lubimovka. They were queer-looking hands for any man, not gnarled and blunt by honest work in fields and sheds, with axe and spade and pick, but like the hands of some fine lady, or like those of Sonia the schoolmistress.

Michael turned over the man's body as he lay crumpled up in the snow, and peered into his face. He seemed to have seen that bearded face before, those deep-set eyes, now closed, that straight nose. It was familiar to him in some vague way, like the memory of a face seen in a dream, or some picture. This man was dressed as a peasant. His sheepskin coat was torn. His soldier's boots were broken at the toes like the boots of all those men who had come back from the war. But this was no peasant's face. Even Michael, who was a stupid man, could see that. Lying there unconscious, grey as though the hand of death had touched it, it had a strange, noble look that was startling.

'He is like a saint,' thought Michael. 'He is even a little like the good Christ.'

He had a sense of fear. There was something uncommon in the look of this senseless man who had come to a village from which other men fled, and where everyone waited for death. How had he come? There were no more boats on the Volga because of the floating ice. There were no sledges from Tetiushi, or any other place, because the horses had all dropped dead on the roadsides. This man with hands like a woman and face like a saint had come in a miraculous way, suddenly, just as one heard in old Russian tales which old women told about the stoye on winter nights.

Michael called out to his wife:

'Anna! Anna!'

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The fear in his voice brought her quickly to the door.

'Have you killed the little cow?' she asked, and then saw her man leaning over the body in the snow.

She crossed herself, and then leaned back, faint, against the doorpost.

'May his soul know peace!' she said.

Michael was angry with her because he was afraid.

'Can't you see his soul is still inside his body?' he growled. 'Help me carry the wretch indoors. Snow makes a bad bed.'

'You're mad,' said Anna, drawing a shawl closer about her face. 'If it's typhus he'll die better in the snow. And if it's hunger, we have enough mouths to feed and no food.'

'I'll kill the little cow,' said Michael. 'There will be meat to eat for a month or two. God will curse us if we leave this fool to die at our threshold. Take hold of his legs, or I'll beat you.'

Anna came from her doorway and peered at the senseless man, and touched his forehead.

'It's not the typhus,' she said. 'He's as cold as the snow beneath him.'

'Look at his hands,' said Michael.

Anna looked at the hands lying limp on the snow, and then at the face above the sheepskin coat.

'He is like a saint in a picture-book,' she said, and put both hands on her bosom.

The man and woman took hold of the senseless body. In the old days Michael and his wife could have lifted him as easily as a sack of potatoes, but hunger had weakened them. They dragged the stranger across their threshold, and then stood in their room, breathing heavily. Their little girl Katinka climbed down from the bed above the stove, and stood with bare feet on the boards, clasping her mother's hand. The baby was whimpering in its sleep in a cradle near the stove.

It was the little girl who first made the astounding reve-

lation which afterwards was believed by all the people of Lubimovka, except Vladimir, the Soviet agent, and Braunberg, the Jew, and Sara, his daughter.

'He is like the Little Father,' she said, and looked up at a mark on the wall opposite the ikon. It was a mark made by a picture-frame which had hung there for years, as in all Russian cottages before the revolution, where a portrait of the Tsar, cut from some newspaper or magazine, or reproduced in colour by German printers, had always hung opposite the holy ikon. It was strange that this child should have remembered, for it was more than a year since the picture had been taken down by orders of the local Soviet, which had prohibited all portraits of the last of the Romanovs. With her bare feet she pattered to a cupboard on the other side of the stove, and dragged out a coloured print in a wooden frame, and held it up.

They were astounded and dismayed.

'The child is an idiot,' said Michael sullenly. 'Hunger has made her a little imbecile.'

'It is a wonder we don't all go mad,' said his wife.

They stood there, staring first at the portrait, and then at the man stretched out at their feet.

The portrait of the Tsar showed him in his uniform, with the star of St. Stanislaus at his breast. His beard was well trimmed. He smiled out of his deep-set eyes. This man lying senseless on their bare boards had a ragged beard, and there was no smile on his face and no star at his breast. And yet, now that Katinka had spoken her words, there could be no avoiding the amazing likeness of the stranger to that picture of the Emperor. Feature by feature it was the same face. The wide nostrils were the same, the low, broad forehead, the deep-set eye sockets.

The two peasants, husband and wife, stood silent, with their hands clasped and their mouths gaping.

It was the husband who spoke first.

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'There are many Russians like the dead Tsar,' he said, but his voice trembled uncertainly.

Anna, his wife, suddenly went down on her knees beside the stranger's senseless body, and thrust her hand beneath his sheepskin coat, as though about to choke him. Her poor, claw-like hands, skinny with hunger, trembled feverishly. There was a thin silver chain round the man's neck. She tugged at it, and with a jerk pulled something out from below a ragged vest. It was a jewel in the shape of a star, which lay now above the shaggy sheepskin. In that cottage of Lubimovka there was no light except the dusk of an October afternoon, with the white snow outside, but where the jewel lay it seemed to these peasants as though a real star had fallen from the sky, and was twinkling in their poor bare room.

Katinka clasped her thin little hands, and gave a cry of joy, as always she did when her father brought in a little milk from the cow.

'Truly,' she said, 'it is the Little Father!'

Michael went down on his knees beside his wife, and stared at the star so closely that his straw-coloured beard almost touched it. He raised a trembling hand, and tried to take hold of the jewel; but something withheld him, and he shrank back fearfully with a queer, strangled cry.

Anna swayed to and fro like a woman crooning to the dead.

'Christ Jesus!' she cried. 'It is a miracle of God!'

At that moment the man who had been senseless opened his eyes, and stirred with a little groan.

As though trying to hide some dangerous and deadly secret, Anna put her claw-like hands at his throat again, and thrust the star out of sight below his ragged vest.

The man flung an arm over his head, and cried out in a faint, agonising voice:

'Oh, Death!'

Michael and his wife stayed there stiffly on their knees,

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staring at him in a dazed, frightened way. It was little Katinka who seemed to have most sense. She brought a jug of water from a shelf, and, wetting her little thin hand, moistened the man's forehead, and put some drops on his lips and beard. Presently he turned his head slightly, and smiled at her.

'Am I dead at last?' he asked very faintly. 'Are you one of my little daughters?'

'You are my Little Father,' said Katinka.

'Why, yes,' said the man, 'I am the Little Father of all my dear people.'

He spoke only in a whisper, but his words were heard clearly by Michael and his wife, kneeling on either side of him.

'*Gospodin!*' said Michael, meaning Sir or Lord, 'who are you, in God's name?'

The stranger heard the words and looked puzzled. For quite a long time he did not answer. Then he struggled up a little so that he leaned on one elbow, and stared round the dim room and into the faces of the peasant and his wife. Presently he spoke in a stronger voice, though still very gently.

'I am Nicholas Alexandrovitch, a wandering beggar. I think I am dying, so that I shall not trouble you long. What is the name of this village?'

It was Katinka who answered. The child's father and mother seemed speechless and stricken by fear.

'It is Lubimovka. We are all dying. Soon there will be no food for anyone. Then we shall die quickly.'

'My poor people!' said the man, with a pitiful groan. 'My poor Russia! My poor little ones!'

Tears came into his eyes and rolled slowly down his haggard cheeks until they touched his beard.

'If we are very careful,' said Katinka, 'we have enough bread to keep us alive for three or four weeks. And father is going to kill the little cow so that we shall have meat

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until the winter. After that, of course, we shall have to die.'

She spoke simply, with the gravity of a child to a grown-up friend who understands. Then she went to the cupboard again and brought out the piece of bread which had been put aside for her evening meal. It was the bread made of straw and leaves and husks which I saw in that village in the year of famine.

'Eat, Little Father,' she said to the stranger.

He shook his head and smiled.

'I have come here to die, not to eat your bread, my little one.'

'If you do not eat it I shall cry,' said Katinka.

He shook his head again, and said: 'No, no, I am not hungry.'

But when Katinka burst into tears he took a small portion of her bread and ate it, and said: 'If men were as kind as little children, this world would be like heaven.'

'*Gospodin*,' said Michael, moistening his lips and speaking hoarsely, 'all that we have, which is little, we shall be glad to share with you.'

'I thank you, *Tavarish*,' answered the man, using that word which means 'comrade', and replaces all other titles in Russia, by order of the Bolsheviks.

That was the beginning of this legend or myth about the coming of the Tsar to Lubimovka. It was that evening after dark, when the man who called himself Nicholas Alexandrovitch was sleeping on the floor beside the stove, stirring sometimes in his dreams, that Michael took his lantern and walked through the falling snow to the house where young Sacha the poet lived with his mother and his crippled sister Lydia. Before the revolution, this family had been rich, with a house in Moscow; but Sacha's father, who was an officer of the old army, had been killed in the war, and the house in Moscow and all their wealth had been taken by the Bolsheviks, and now Sacha and his mother and his crippled sister were as poor as all the others

in Lubimovka. But Sacha was a great reader of books, and wrote poetry; and, although no more than nineteen years of age, played a man's part in the village, and was the only one who was not afraid of Vladimir, the Soviet agent, or of Braunberg the Jew. He was the secretary of the village council, and had been put in prison for a time for resisting the requisition of grain and potatoes by the Red Army after the failure of the harvest. There was not a peasant in Lubimovka who did not regard this young man with hero-worship, because he had defied the Red soldiers for their sake. It was partly for that reason that Michael went round to his house to tell him of the stranger who had come. But it was also because Sacha had once lived in Moscow. Assuredly he must have seen the Tsar, the Little Father, as he was called then. He would be able to say whether this man who wore a flaming star under his vest was, or was not, the Emperor of all the Russias. Michael had hardly a doubt about it. But Sacha would know.

The young man was reading aloud by the dim light of a wax candle when Michael stood inside the door, with his fur cap in his hand and a thin mantle of snow on his leather tunic. Lydia, the crippled sister, lay on a couch by the stove, and Michael could see her shining eyes in a white face, though the candle-light hardly reached her. Sacha's mother sat with bowed head and her hands in her lap on the other side of the room—a black figure.

Sacha was reading something from a big book. It was something about passing from death to life, where there would be no hunger, but eternal joy and beauty. Then he raised his head as Michael opened the door, and the cold wind made his candle gutter.

'I wish to speak with you, Sacha,' said Michael.

Sacha pushed back a lock of hair that had fallen over his forehead, and shielded the candle with his hands.

'What is it, Michael? Is it bad news you bring through the snow?'

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'It is strange news,' said Michael. 'It is hard to believe one's own eyes.'

'What have you seen?' asked Sacha.

Michael was slow in answering. He was a shy man, and perhaps these people would laugh at him if he told them something which was hard to believe. Perhaps also it would not be safe to tell anyone but Sacha. Women could not keep a secret. And this was a secret which might lead to trouble. They might all be shot by the Soviet Government if it leaked out.

'Pardon me,' said Michael, 'but I wish to tell you alone, Sacha. If you will step outside the door——'

'No, no,' said Sacha, 'it is better in this warm room. You need not be afraid of my mother and sister.'

'I am afraid of what I have to tell you,' said Michael.

It was some time before he could bring himself to tell these people. Sacha thought his cow had died. And little Lydia, the crippled girl, prayed that typhus had not stricken his household. There was no sound in the room except a kind of gasp when at last he told his tale.

'A stranger has come to the village. He fell with weakness at my door. It was my little girl who saw his likeness, and my wife who found a jewelled star beneath his vest. He is no common man. I verily believe, as God hears me, that it is the man whom we used to call our Little Father. The Tsar of Russia, whom all men believe to be dead.'

The people in the room did not laugh at him. He was glad of that. But they stared at him silently. He could see their eyes upon him beyond the radiance of the candlelight.

It was Sacha who spoke first.

'Have you gone mad, Michael Michaelovitch?'

Michael answered with humility.

'It is possible that I have gone a little mad, Sacha. In this time of hunger and death it is hard to keep one's wits. But I believe that the Tsar Nicholas is now sleeping on the floor below my stove, and that my wife Anna is on her

knees beside him, and that my little daughter Katinka was led by God to see his likeness.'

They would not believe him. And yet they did not laugh at him. It seemed to Michael that they were a little frightened, as people who listen to a tale of ghosts, not believing, but afraid when the wind howls outside, and when the door blows open. Sacha's face had gone very white, and his crippled sister sat up on her couch with burning eyes.

'Do not tell this tale to others in the village,' said Sacha. 'Vladimir will report it to Moscow. You will be shot if they hear it there, Michael.'

It was on the next morning that Sacha went round to Michael's house. The stranger was sitting by the stove with Katinka on his lap. He was telling her a story of old Russian history, and she had her arm about his neck, and her thin little face against his bearded cheek. Michael stood watching them from the doorway of the inner room, and Anna, his wife, was scrubbing the floor, and muttering prayers as she worked.

Sacha stood on the threshold and called out to Michael, while his eyes rested on the stranger's face.

'Have you killed the little cow, Michael?'

'I shall kill it directly,' said Michael.

The stranger looked at Sacha and smiled, and said: 'Good morning, comrade. You see, I have found a friend in Lubimovka.'

'From what part do you come?' asked Sacha.

'I have been wandering,' answered the man. 'In spite of the famine people have given me a share of their bread. After all, the charity of man is greater than cruelty. That is the hope of the world—our only hope.'

'Here,' said Sacha, 'we wait for certain death. There is no hope this side of the grave.'

'I shall be glad to die here,' answered the stranger; 'perhaps I have reached the end of my journey!'

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'I am young,' said Sacha; 'I do not wish to die.'

He spoke harshly, and all the time his eyes were fixed on the stranger's face.

'It is hard for youth,' said the stranger, very gently. 'The old men of the world have betrayed them. It was the wickedness of the old men that made the war, and led to the agony and evil that followed in the wake of war. The sins of the fathers are visited on the children. How sad and pitiful is that! I am one of the old men whose ignorance and folly must be paid for by the sacrifice of youth. And yet Katinka here forgives me. Perhaps God will forgive, knowing my weakness and how I was betrayed.'

Sacha stood there with a grave face, and one lock of hair falling over his forehead. Suddenly, as though something had broken in his spirit, he turned his head away and wept, and then stumbled forward and went down on one knee before the stranger, and took his hand, and said: 'My Lord, my Lord!'

The man who called himself Nicholas Alexandrovitch was startled, and perhaps frightened, by this homage of the boy. He put little Katinka off his lap and stood up, leaning against the tall stove because of his weakness, and touched Sacha's head with his right hand.

'Do not call me that!' he said. 'I am your comrade. I am a poor beggar living on the charity of starving folk. I am the lowest of the low in this Empire of misery and hunger and death. I am less lucky than those who have died more quickly. I am the scapegoat laden with the sins of Russia.'

It must be remembered that this boy, Sacha, was weakened by hunger, like all men in the villages of the Volga valley, and who, before then, had lived through the terror of the revolution, and had seen Russia brought to ruin and anarchy, and all its old civilisation overthrown. I think that is one explanation why not only Sacha, but other people in Lubimovka, found it easy to believe that

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the bearded stranger who had come among them was the man who had been their Tsar. They were in an emotional, overwrought state. The womenfolk, and even many of the men, had been praying for some miracle to happen by God's grace to save them from starvation. There were some who believed that war, famine and pestilence which had come upon the world was a presage of the second coming of Christ. Mingled with the Christian faith and most wonderful resignation of these peasants, all sorts of fanaticisms, credulities, superstitions, cropped up in those villages in the famine belt and beyond. The presence, therefore, of a man bearing a remarkable likeness—no doubt—to the Tsar Nicholas, and speaking in terms of mysticism and allegory, and certainly of the old noble rank, whoever he was, did not need more than a suggestion—which the child Katinka had supplied—to convince these people that he was truly the former ruler of Russia, who had come among them in the guise of a beggar. That is my theory, though I confess Sacha ridicules it and swears that he recognised beyond all doubt the Tsar himself, whom he had seen as a child in the palace of the Kremlin.

'How beyond all doubt?' I asked him, and he said: 'Because below his left ear there was a little mole which I had remarked when my father took me to the palace and held me up for the Tsar to bless.'

After that first meeting Sacha went round often to Michael's house, in order to gaze at the stranger with reverent eyes and listen to his tales to Katinka—he knew all the legends of Russian history—and his simple talk to the child's parents. He had a habit of sighing deeply in the midst of his tales about the old saints and heroes, and sometimes fell into a kind of trancelike silence, when the tears dropped slowly from his eyes and fell in his beard. At those times no one dared to interrupt his thoughts, and presently he would seem to wake with a start and smile at Katinka, and say: 'Where was I in that tale?'

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Always at meal times he would eat only the tiniest morsel of that poor bread which they made out of apple leaves and straw, and even when the little cow was killed at last, he would eat none of its meat, but only dipped his bread in the gravy. It was wonderful that he could keep alive on such little food, and although the weakness of his body was visible, he still had strength enough to walk a little, unlike other men in the village—the blacksmith among them—who lay on their beds above the stoves hardly able to lift a hand because of their long hunger.

Sacha's visits to Michael's house became a mystery to Sonia the schoolmistress, and it was her dear jealousy which caused this boy to break the secrecy which he had imposed upon his own lips as well as upon his mother and sister. How could he keep this secret from her when they had none other in the world?

It was six months before the famine that they had discovered their love, and found it gave them not only joy, so that all the misery of Russia under Bolshevik rule did not touch them any more, but also courage to face all else that might happen, and even death itself. All Sacha's poetry was written for Sonia. All the knowledge she had from the books she read after her drudgery in the little school house was poured into the letters she wrote him every day, though they were never posted, but slipped into his pocket between their embraces. Together they discussed all the problems of life and death and eternity, and because of the time in which they lived, the philosophy of this boy and girl was touched with the grim knowledge of man's cruelty, and the failure of all men's dreams of liberty and progress. Yet with the faith and hope of youth they believed in the future of Russia after this time of agony, in its regeneration and greatness.

'We shan't live to see it, my dear,' said Sacha many times, but was comforted when Sonia touched his hand and said: 'Not in the body, but in the spirit, my comrade.'

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When the famine began, Sacha tightened his belt and hoarded up some of his own rations so that Sonia might not starve. But then he found that she was already starving herself by saving her rations for him. Only by entreaties and quarrels could they agree to eat enough to keep themselves alive so long as any food remained. This love story in the heart of the famine seemed to me one of the most touching and pitiful tales I have heard, and it was Sacha himself who told me, with that lack of self-consciousness and that simplicity which are the source of charm in Russian character.

It was after the fourth night that Sonia came round to Sacha's house. They met in the street, there, with a slight snow falling on them so that their fur caps were whitened.

He saw by her face that the girl had been weeping, and his heart felt a stab of guiltiness. Yet she smiled at him and spoke lightly.

'You look older since I last saw you, Sacha. Is it four nights or four years since we met?'

He stared down at his feet in the snow, afraid to meet her candid eyes. Yet after that moment of thought he knew that he must tell her the secret that had kept him away from her, or be unloyal to their love.

'Sonia,' he said, 'it is dangerous to know what I am going to tell you. It is the most perilous secret in Russia to-day, though its secrets are full of terror for those who keep them.'

'Do not tell me that you have lost your love for me,' she answered. 'I could bear any secret but that.'

He put his arm round her shoulder.

'Not that. That is impossible. But what I have to tell you is hardly less incredible. So unbelievable that even now I dare not tell you lest you should think me mad.'

'What you tell me, I believe,' she said, simply and gravely.

He told her then.

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'A stranger has come to this village. He is a man whom all of us believed to be dead. A man betrayed by all his friends, and hated by all the world. He would be killed like a rat if they found him now, though he is innocent of all evil, I am certain.'

'Is it Christ that has risen again?' asked Sonia, with a strange look at Sacha.

He was profoundly startled by those words. He, too, had wondered if Christ would come to Lubimovka before the ending of the world.

'Not that,' he said. 'But the stranger who has come was the ruler of all our people, and loved them, though he was powerless to help them. In Michael's house, lying on the boards, half dead with hunger, is he who was the Tsar. I have seen him and talked with him. I have no doubt.'

'And you are not mad?' asked Sonia.

'No, I am not mad.'

'Then I believe,' she said.

Sacha led her into his house, and took off her shawl after the door was closed, and spoke to his mother and sister.

'I have told Sonia, and she believes.'

'Then there is one more to be hanged when the Soviet knows,' said Lydia, his crippled sister, and her voice had a sharp fear in it.

While they were talking in the darkness, without even one candle, because there was no more fat or oil, there was a knock at the door.

'Who is there?' called Sacha sharply, and from outside a quiet voice answered:

'Nicholas Alexandrovitch, the beggar.'

Sacha opened the door, and across the threshold came the bearded man who wore a hidden star under his ragged vest. He carried Michael's lantern, and swayed a little as he stood on the threshold.

'My dear friends,' he said, 'I come for the sake of my

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little comrade, Katinka. She is stricken with typhus, and her mother asks for Sonia the schoolmistress, who saved the child of Boris the blacksmith.'

Sonia moved across the room until she was touched with the rays of the lantern shining across the threshold.

'I am Sonia,' she said. 'I will go to the child.'

'It is brave of you,' said the man with the lantern. 'The women of Russia have the spirit of Christ in their hearts. God will forgive the sins of their men after this time of punishment.'

Sacha's mother, who had once been a lady of the Imperial Court in Moscow, though now she was like a gipsy, with dirty hands because she did rough work and there was no soap in Lubimovka, rose from her chair and faltered across the room, with her dark eyes staring at the man with the lantern. Then she uttered a shrill cry and fell to her knees before the stranger, and clasped his hands and wept over them.

'Do not kneel before me,' he said. 'I am Nicholas the beggar. An outcast and a sinner.'

He beckoned to Sonia, and said: 'Come, for my little comrade, Katinka, is very ill.'

He held the lantern while she put on her shawl again, and led her out into the snow.

Sacha bent over his mother, and raised her from the floor.

'It is true, then?' he asked, and she said: 'It is his face and voice.'

It was through Anna, the wife of Michael, that the story was spread in Lubimovka. In her distraction because of Katinka's fever she talked wildly to her neighbours, and from cottage to cottage there passed the whisper that the stranger in the village was the man whom the world believed to be dead. Little groups of peasants gathered outside Michael's house, where Katinka lay tossing in her little bed by the stove, and they peered through the win-

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dows for a glimpse of the stranger who sat by the side of the child whom he called his little comrade. They whispered together, and one old woman said: 'Perhaps he has come to rescue us from famine. God will listen to his prayers.'

Another said: 'He has but to touch the child, and she will be well.'

Others said: 'It is certainly the Little Father. But he will be taken and killed if we do not keep his secret.'

It was a bad way of keeping a secret, this gathering outside Michael's house. Vladimir, the Soviet agent, saw them there and questioned them. One toothless old woman who hated him spat on the ground, and said: 'All you Bolshevik devils will soon be hanged as you deserve. Our Tsar is back again.'

'What does the old fool say?' asked Vladimir, with a black look. He was not haggard and thin like the other men in Lubimovka. As the Soviet agent he had first share of food sent down from Moscow at the beginning of the famine. It was believed that he had hoarded many sacks of potatoes which belonged to the commune. He was feared as well as hated, because he was in the pay of the Cheka—the secret police—and could send people to their death if he had a grudge against them.

Now they tried to cover up the words of the old woman, Kakoshka.

'She has lost her wits with her last tooth!'

'She is the mother of imbeciles!'

But another woman in the crowd shouted at Vladimir:

'It is true what she says. Our Little Father has come to Lubimovka. Lenin had better look out for himself, and all his murderers.'

Vladimir scowled round on the peasants.

'You people have all gone daft. If you weren't all starving to death, I would have you sent to the prisons in Moscow.'

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He strode away down the village, but he must have made it his business to find out more about the story, for that night he came to Michael's house with Braunberg the Jew, and the girl Sara. They were the only Communists in Lubimovka, where the peasants had no love for that philosophy.

Sonia was there, mixing some medicine for the child Katinka, whose thin little face was scarlet as she lay unconscious. Michael and his wife were sitting at their bare board weeping, with their heads on their arms, because their child was very near death. At the side of the stove the bearded stranger sat with his hands clasped on his knees and pity in his eyes as he watched Katinka.

Vladimir and his two companions came in noisily, without knocking at the door.

Michael raised his head and said: 'What do you want, *Tavarish?*'

'I want to see the stranger in your house,' said Vladimir.

'I am here,' said the man who called himself Nicholas Alexandrovitch.

Vladimir stared at him and spoke roughly:

'What's your name? Who are you?'

'I am Nicholas, a wandering beggar.'

'Where do you come from?'

The bearded man smiled, and raised his hand towards the west.

'I have been through many villages of Russia, always wandering in search of death. But I have not found it yet.'

Vladimir laughed harshly.

'It's easy to find in Russia, to most men. Death! This village stinks with it.'

'And this house,' said Sara, the daughter of the Jew. 'I do not like the smell of typhus. Let's get out of here, Vladimir. There is no harm in this man.'

Vladimir stared at the stranger again.

'You had better get on with your wandering, old

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father,' he said. 'The sooner you're out of Lubimovka the better for you, or you'll find death sooner than you expect. There are crazy folk here who take you for the dead Tsar. It is not good to be taken for a ghost. It leads to trouble.'

'That is true,' said the man. 'I will go away. I do not wish to lead the people into trouble. They have had enough.'

Vladimir spoke less harshly.

'Well, I will give you a day or two. It's not your fault, old man, that the people here are daft with hunger and misery. Not their fault either, poor wretches.'

Suddenly Sonia drew back from Katinka's bedside and gave a little cry. But a louder cry came from Anna, the mother of the child. She sprang up from her chair by the table and raised both hands above her head, and then fell with a piercing cry by the side of Katinka's little bed.

Nicholas the beggar, rose also from his chair and crossed himself. Then he put his hand on the shoulder of Michael and said: 'It is well with the child. She is dead. God is merciful.'

'Let us get out of here,' said Sara the Jewess.

Vladimir and Braunberg and the woman were quick to get away from this house into which death had come so suddenly.

That evening when Sacha came round to take Sonia back to her house, he found only Nicholas the beggar in the front room. Little Katinka had been carried into the inner room, and Michael and Anna were praying with Sonia the schoolmistress.

The stranger was pacing up and down with his hands clasped behind his back. When he saw Sacha cross the threshold he smiled, and put his fingers to his lips for silence.

'My little comrade has gone ahead of me,' he said in a quiet voice. 'So many of my comrades have gone before me! I feel lonely as I wander.'

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'My Lord,' said Sacha, 'when is there going to be an end of all this misery? When are you coming back again so that Russia may be saved?'

'It is not through me that Russia can be saved,' said the man. 'Russia must save herself, after much agony and punishment for sin. We are being punished. Our poor Russia is suffering for the sins of our fathers. But her soul lives in these peasant folk. It is by their faith and charity that Russia will be saved.'

'One day you will come back,' said Sacha, with a kind of sob.

The bearded man shook his head.

'My end is near at hand. The end of my journey is close upon me. I shall be glad to rest at last.'

Sacha has not told me all that was spoken between them that night. There are some things that he keeps secret still, but it seems that the stranger spoke in a kind of vision of the future that would come to Russia, and of a splendid destiny. Then, later, he put his hand below his ragged vest and pulled out the jewelled star, and slipped the silver chain over his head and gave the star to Sacha.

'This is all the wealth I have left in the world,' he said. 'I kept it as a holy relic, for it belonged to my ancestors and to one dear saint. But it is better to buy some food with it for these poor people here. If you can get as far as Moscow, it is likely that you could sell it for some grain. There are people still who covet such glittering stones.'

'Moscow is a world away,' said Sacha. 'I could not get there or come back again.'

'Then my star is worthless,' said Nicholas, and his head drooped a little.

But he would not take it back again, and that night, when Sacha went back with Sonia, he carried the star in his breast pocket and it seemed to burn above his heart.

There was heavy snow next day, and Sacha bent his head to the storm when early in the morning he trudged

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round to Michael's house. All through the night he had lain awake, thinking of the star which lay under his pillow and of the man who had given it into his keeping. He had determined to make the journey to Moscow for the sake of the people of Lubimovka. If he could sell the star he might bring back food enough to save many lives. But before going he wanted to see its owner again, so that he might take a message from him to people in Moscow who believed him to be dead. The boy was on fire with faith and hope, so that he did not feel the coldness of the snow as it fell in flakes upon his face. He had an absolute faith that this man in Michael's house was he who had been Tsar of All the Russias, and Sacha was persuaded that it was a miracle which might lead Russia out of the depths and save her people.

On the threshold of Michael's house he saw the little coffin of Katinka being carried out on her father's shoulders. Behind, with her shawl over her face and shoulders, walked the poor wife Anna, and some peasant women who were wailing with her. Last of all came Sonia, weeping.

Sacha went up to the girl whom he loved before any in the world, and touched her on the arm.

'Where is the stranger?' he asked.

'He has gone,' said Sonia. 'He went away just now, after kissing Katinka before her coffin was closed. See, there are his footsteps in the snow.'

Sacha gave a queer cry.

'I must follow him! I must speak with him again.'

'The snow will hide his footsteps,' said Sonia. 'You will never follow his track.'

But Sacha left her and hurried over the snow, where, very clearly at first, were the footmarks in the snow of a man with a long stride. They led up the village street to the gate in the stockade on the northern side, and then beyond to the flat, open country, until they disappeared

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beneath the snow which was falling thickly now. Sacha stumbled forward through the snow, which a light wind blew upon his breast and cap. He could hardly see a yard ahead, and he called out many times: 'My Lord! My Lord!' But no voice answered him. The stranger had disappeared into that white world of swirling flakes. Presently Sacha stood still, and then retraced his steps with his head bent.

Nicholas Alexandrovitch had gone on his journey again in search of death, and in Lubimovka he was not seen again.

Sacha kept the star, which was the only proof of a visit which otherwise might have seemed a dream. There was no need to go to Moscow to barter it for bread and potatoes, because the world had heard at last the cry of a starving people, and help came from England and the United States after many had died in Lubimovka and all the villages of the Volga valley. It was at that time, and with some American relief officers, that I met Sacha and Sonia and heard their strange tale of the man with the star. It was Sonia the schoolmistress who was put in charge of the first soup kitchen, and it was good to see her joy when the children were fed.

'If only little Katinka could be here!' she murmured, and then said some words which I could not understand.

'It was the Little Father who brought us this good luck. God heard his prayers for the Russian people.'

'Whom do you call the Little Father?' I asked, and it was then, from this girl and from Sacha, who spoke good English, that I heard the story I have now written. It seemed to me then as it seems to me now—utterly fantastic. Not for a moment do I believe that it was the Tsar of All the Russias who came to Lubimovka as a wandering beggar. Doubtless it was some Russian gentleman of the old *régime*, perhaps with some distant touch of kinship with the Tsar which would account for his likeness.

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But neither Sacha nor Sonia, nor any of the people of Lubimovka, will listen to any theory of that kind. It was the Tsar himself, they say, and perhaps a hundred years hence this legend will still be believed in the Volga valley, where already the jewelled star is kept as a relic and a proof of what is unbelievable.

BY
SHEILA KAYE-SMITH



A DAY IN A WOMAN'S LIFE

MORNING

THE first colourless light of dawn crept slowly up from the east, over the meadows of Padgeham and Dorn-gate. It left the Rother marshes in shadow, touching only the tops of the hills, making them stand out as pale islands above the valleys of the little streams. It shimmered on the windows of Pipsden, that cluster of tiny cottages on the road from Hawkhurst to Rye.

The cottages were beginning to wake—blinds were drawn, windows opened, columns of blue, wood-scented smoke rose out of their chimneys into the windless air. It was time for the men to go to work—on the Tong Wood estate, or on the Manor farm—and the women were busy preparing breakfast.

Only a house rather larger than the rest, standing a little way back from the road among some barns, was still asleep.

For some time Joyce Armstrong had been conscious of the disturbing light. She had thrust her face into the pillow and tried to shut it away. But she was aware of it spilling itself about the room, over her shoulders, into the mirror, and she knew when the moment came when it filled itself with sunshine and she could ignore it no longer.

She sat up in bed, shaking back the long hair from her face, stretching out her arms slowly.

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She was a beautiful woman, of slow movement and heavy though not ungraceful build—at the beginning of her thirties, but bearing their trace not in any ageing of her features or her skin so much as in an indefinite weight of experience shown in her sombre eyes. The first spring sun had tanned her lightly, and her extended throat and arms showed a warm yellowish brown against her white muslin nightdress.

She yawned . . . carelessly flinging the back of one large hand to her mouth. Then a deep shiver went through her.

Time to get up. It must be quite seven o'clock, and she had a lot to do before she started. Started . . . should she go? Why, of course she'd go. She must know for certain—understand the meaning of all this. Anything would be better than the past week, with its uncertainty, its hope deferred.

There might be a letter this morning. Of course, it wasn't likely that he'd write at the last minute—unless he put her off. He'd done that before—put her off at the last minute. He probably did it like that to avoid any protest or entreaty from her.

Bah! It was horrible thinking of him like this—seeing his faults so clearly, preparing for his little treacheries. But after three years one couldn't help it—if only one could help going on in spite of his faults. That was what humiliated her—forgive, forgive, forgive. Angry tears flowed into her eyes and she jumped out of bed.

She pulled up the blind, and the sunshine filled the room.

A soft blue sky lay over the fields, over the woods that roughened the piling ridges of Kent. Near at hand was the smoke of the Pipsden breakfast fires, the red roofs slanting to windward, the busyness of the little back-yards, the stillness of a pond.

Her throat tightened, and the tears of anger became tears of blinding sorrow. Oh, those soft blue and golden

days that had been in the beginning, when every day some token of his love and tenderness came up to her from the marsh—either a letter or a little gift, or he himself in his big Sunbeam car. . . . She remembered how once she had heard its throbbing in her dreams, and waked at seven to find him already there. Those were the days before he was sure of her.

She turned quickly from the window, back into the sun-filled room, and shrugged on a kimono which lay over a chair, thrusting at the same time her bare feet into mules.

Clap, clap went her heels on the carpet of the room, and then a louder clap on the polished boards that surrounded it. It would wake Mother if she went clapping downstairs like that: mules were no good if your heels were slim—better have got mocassins. But Laurie had loved the way they used to hang from her toes when she dangled her legs. . . . She must not think of Laurie—already she could feel the tears coming back. She made a vow to herself not to think of Laurie till she had made the tea.

The kitchen was dark. The blinds were down and the sun was at the other side of the house. She hoped there were no blackbeetles about. Oh, what was that?—only Perkins the cat, rubbing against her legs in an ecstasy of joy. His tail waved like a pine tree above his arched back, his hair stood out, all his body quivered with the organ-music of his song. The lovely, lovely thing! She picked him up, and buried her face in the humming softness of his flank.

‘Oh, Perkins, love me—don’t kick—don’t go away.’

But Perkins was on the floor, still vibrant, but aloof. His love was strictly practical, with a view to the morning’s milk—it was not to be squandered on anything merely human. He stepped daintily beside her to the door, as she went to take in the jug. Then he led the way back to his saucer. She filled it with new milk.

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'You don't deserve it, you naughty Perkins. You don't really love me—it's only cupboard love.'

'Lap-lap-lap-smack,' said Perkins.

'After all, why should you love me more disinterestedly than—no, I haven't made the tea.'

She leaped to the stove. What a nuisance it was, being unable to get a girl to sleep in the house. One had to do all the morning's work oneself. In summer it wasn't so bad, but in the winter. . . . Ugh! Thank heaven winter was over. But next winter . . . what would that be like? Not like last winter—no, it couldn't be. It must be different. But would it be? She mustn't think of it. 'If winter comes can spring be far behind?' A tear fell hissing on the stove. 'Some more milk, Perkins?—don't put your head in the jug.'

A loud rat-tat sounded in the front of the house. Joyce jerked herself upright, and the blood ebbed out of her cheeks. That was the post.

For a moment she felt as if she could not move. Was there a letter from him lying on the doormat, where she had so often seen it?—his black, vigorous handwriting distinguishing it from the other letters, even at a distance. But if there was, it could mean nothing good—it would be putting her off, otherwise he'd never leave her ten days without a letter and then write on the morning he was expecting to see her.

It would be better if there was no letter—and yet, would it? Would the fact that he had not written tell her anything—wouldn't it leave her more hopelessly in the dark than ever? At least if he wrote, she would know definitely if he expected to see her, and if he did not, why not. Lord! what a coward she was! She had it in her power to put an end to all this questioning by going to the door. But she could not move.

Rat-tat. Again! That meant the postman was waiting. She would have to go.

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‘Good morning—a registered parcel to be signed for’—that must be from Laurie—who else? No, it was her mother’s tortoiseshell spectacles, sent back from repair. . . . ‘Thanks. And the letters? Thanks. Good morning.’

A circular, her mother’s weekly letter from her aunt—that was all.

Then suddenly she knew that she had wanted desperately to hear, even if it meant the destruction of her one faint hope of seeing him. Anything was better than this uncertainty.

He had not written for ten days, not since their last meeting. He had never been so long before without writing—and she had written twice, the last letter imploring him to write to her, if it was only a line. What had happened? Something must have happened to account for his silence. Had he gone away suddenly, and in his hurry forgotten to post the letter that told her of it—or had he given the letter to someone else who had forgotten to post it?

All the explanations which could possibly leave her a good opinion of him rushed through her mind, as she took the kettle off the stove, filled the teapot, and set the teacups on the bedroom tray.

By the time she was carrying the tray upstairs, others more disquieting had arrived. Perhaps he was wanting to choke her off, and had chosen this way of doing it—perhaps he had found someone else he liked. . . . Oh no, he had been so sweet when she had seen him last and they had planned this day. He could not have changed. Perhaps he was ill, too ill to write. Perhaps he was dead.

‘Good morning, mother dear. I hope you had a good night.’

She set down the tray by her mother’s bed and kissed her.

‘Here are your spectacles come back—and Aunt Milly’s letter.’

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'I heard you go down stairs a great while ago.'

'Yes—I'm afraid my heels flopped and woke you. I must get some new slippers.'

'No, no; I was awake. I've been awake since five. I wish I could get someone to help you in the mornings, dear; it's a shame for you to have to get up and make my tea.'

'Oh, I don't mind it a bit. I like getting up early on these fine mornings.'

So they prattled to each other—about the house and the weather and the tea and the cat; and all the time Joyce was saying to her mother in her heart—'Oh, mother, I'm in anguish because my lover doesn't write to me, because he's getting casual about me, getting tired—soon he'll want a change, and I love him as much as I ever did, though I see all his faults as I never did. Oh, mother, help me! But you can't.'

No, her mother could not help her, because her mother had never known anything like this. Love had come to her, as it seemed to have come to so many of her generation, as an expanding flower instead of a devouring flame. Love for her had meant marriage, protection, children. Why must it mean something so different to her daughter, who needed all these things as much as she?—oh, why, why, why? . . .

'If Laurie really loved me he would marry me,' she said in her heart. 'It is all nonsense what he says about being unable to. He has a comfortable home and lots of money to spend on things like cars and trips to London. If he really loved me he'd let the mortgage rip, and be poor with me. Then why do I love him? Because I can't help it, I suppose.'

As she was carrying the tray out of the door a new thought flashed upon her—'I won't go'. She suddenly made up her mind not to go to see him at Warehorne.

If he was calmly expecting her to come, though he

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hadn't written to her since their last meeting, it would serve him right if she failed to appear, and perhaps it would make him appreciate her a little more. If he had been untrue to her, it would save her face—if he had merely gone away . . . it would be horrible turning up at the farm and having to ask 'Where is Mr. Holt?' and be answered 'He's not here, ma'am—he's in London.'

No, she had much better not go; and for quite an hour she really thought she wouldn't.

During that hour she dressed, let in the daily girl who prepared the breakfast, and helped her mother over the last stages of her toilet. Perkins came up, voluptuous with the thought of fish, rubbing against Joyce as she knelt to fasten her mother's frock, with little hoarse cries in his throat.

Joyce thought, 'If I don't go, it will mean more uncertainty. To-day's Saturday—I can't hear from him till Monday—perhaps I shan't hear then. I can't bear this for another three days. I must go and find out what's happened, however bad it is.'

'What are you doing to-day, my dear?' asked her mother, when they were at breakfast.

'I'm going over in the car to Warehorne to see the Holts. Don't you remember my telling you?'

'Yes, of course I do—and Lilian Smith is coming to spend the day with me.'

That was another reason why she must go—she'd asked Lilian Smith to come in and spend the day with her mother—'So good of you, Lilian dear; you know I can't leave mother alone all day, and I simply must go to see some people at Warehorne.' What a fool she'd look if she stayed at home!

'Has Mrs. Holt come back from Italy?' continued her mother.

'Yes—she came back last week.' No need to tell that Mrs. Holt had gone to stop with a sister at Brighton.

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'Well, give her my very kind remembrances. Tell her I'm so sorry I'm not equal to calling upon her. Mr. Laurie Holt is at home, I suppose?'

'Yes, mother,' said Joyce, and blushed heavily. It was dreadful having to deceive her mother like this—mother who was so understanding, and so young, in spite of her age—so much younger than her daughter.

Mrs. Armstrong saw the blush and the droop of the head.

'Well, you be wise and careful, my dear. He's paid you a great deal of attention, but young men seem to be so queer nowadays. You musn't let him play with you.'

Joyce laughed.

'Darling, I'm not what you'd exactly call in my first youth, and if I'm not able to look after myself I ought to be.'

That was true, anyhow.

When breakfast was over, she went out to get her car. It was kept in one of the sheds at the back of the house—sheds which did not belong to the Armstrongs, but to the small-holder who rented the steading. The car was a small Humber; she had bought it second-hand in a fit of extravagance and daring with some money left her by an uncle.

Those were the days when the big Sunbeam could no longer be depended on as in the beginning to bridge the gulf between Pipsden and Warehorne, and she had become terribly conscious of the looping miles of the Marsh road. Moreover, the driving lessons had given her a less plaintive excuse for her demands on Laurie's time and company.

She would never be a good driver—she was not capable or resourceful enough—but she had the right amount of timidity, neither so much as to make her nervous, nor so little as to make her presumptuous, and had come through her first six months without any mishap, though her speed-

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ometer recorded over two thousand miles, most of which had been run to and fro between Hawkhurst and the Marsh.

The Humber was difficult to start. She flooded the carburettor, advanced the spark, cranked furiously and in vain. This was when one wanted a man—when one saw the preposterousness of a woman living alone. Living alone . . . and she and Laurie were what she supposed was called 'living together' . . . living together fifteen miles apart.

There! it had started at last. Chug-chug-chug. She brought it round to the door, and ran in to fetch her hat and driving-gloves, and say good-bye to her mother.

'When will you be back, dear?'

'I don't know. They may ask me to stay to tea. But you'll be all right with Lilian, won't you?'

'Oh, perfectly. Enjoy yourself, my dear. You've got a lovely day.'

Suppose Laurie wasn't there—what would she do about lunch? Suppose her conjectures were right as to his being away? She couldn't come home and tell them she'd found nobody at Warehorne. She'd have to get lunch at the inn; she must take enough money with her. Lord! what a fool she was, setting out on a wild goose chase like this.

NOON

She backed out of the gate—a process she hated—and was on the great ridge road that flows like a ribbon from Hawkhurst to Rye. Craunch!—that was an ugly gear-change—how careless she was—Craunch!—the second was just as bad.

Now the little car was running smoothly, the speedometer climbing into the twenties. She leaned back, giving herself up to the soothing of speed. It soothed her thoughts into a queer rhythm—they no longer fluttered to and fro like the needle on the accumulator dial—but went resolutely and rhythmically forward like the wheels.

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They told her that she was a fool to make this journey, and just because she was a fool to make it, it must not be made in vain. When she came home some useful purpose must have been accomplished, she must somehow have retrieved her life out of this miserable uncertainty, either by a fresh start in happiness or by a decided end. Her journey would definitely show her what had happened and what was going to be. She dared not think of joy, so she thought of sorrow.

She was going to break off with Laurie. She could bear no more of his treatment, of his neglect, of the slow, selfish dying of his love. Better end it all, and find herself free again as she had been once. Free . . . it seemed a hundred years since she had been free, since she had woken in the morning feeling that the day belonged to her.

Some words floated into her mind: '*union libre*' . . . that meant 'free union'—free when you are bound in body, mind, and heart. But soon she would be really free, so free that she would forget that once she had found her slavery sweet.

Free. . . . She remembered some words she had read in a novel, about how at the beginning of a love affair the man is the seeker, the maker of occasions, and how at the end it is the woman. That was true. At the beginning it had all been Laurie's pursuit, his delicious pursuit; now it was hers, her sorrowful, humiliating pursuit. Why, it was she who had fixed to-day's meeting: he would have trusted to something more fortuitous bringing them together. Why couldn't she let him go?

But she would let him go—more, she would send him away. 'Laurie, I have endured enough—I can endure no more.'

'Oh, Joyce . . .' he would plead. But she would be firm—'No, I'm going. You must learn that a woman can't be treated like this.'

Oh, she almost hoped that he would give her the oppor-

tunity—that he would not have a reasonable excuse for his conduct. . . . Of course, he might. He might have gone away—he must have gone away—he couldn't have received both her last letters, and not answered them.

Perhaps he had been away, and for some reason the letters had not been forwarded, and he had come back either last night or early this morning, and had found them there, and was now waiting for her full of anxiety, full of regret and tenderness. 'Oh, my darling little Joyce—how dreadful for you. I'm so terribly sorry. But I was sent for suddenly up to town, and those idiots never forwarded anything. How can I make things up to you? It's difficult now, but when we are married. . . .'

The colour had mounted on her cheeks and her lips parted joyfully—she almost forgot it was a dream.

She came out of it the next moment, as a flock of sheep met her in Sandhurst. She stopped the car, and her thoughts seemed to stop with it. She saw only the dusty, panting sheep, and her heart was full of pity—the poor things—many of them had lambs running along beside them, bleating too, but in shriller voices.

They were past now, and she set forward again, through the trim, wide street of Sandhurst, quickening her pace towards Linkhill.

How well she knew the road—the sign of the running greyhound outside the inn, the throws where one road went into Sussex and the other into Kent.

She had hardly ever been along that Kentish road, though she had often wanted to. She had used the car almost entirely for her visits to Warehorne. But when she was Free she would drive a lot about the country, she would take her mother out for drives—her mother had often seemed as if she wanted to come and wondered why her daughter drove off without her. She would make up to her mother for a lot of things when she was Free. . . .

She knew now that she would be free—that momentary

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softness of hope was but a dream. Laurie would have no reasonable excuse to offer, and short of a clear, convincing, reasonable excuse she would not forgive. If he had been unfaithful (she had forgiven him for that once) or remiss (she had forgiven him for that a hundred times) or had got into another of his queer, selfish muddles, her mind was made up as to what she would do.

'I can bear no more. You don't really love me, or you couldn't treat me like this. No—it really is ended now.'

'Let us agree to give up love
And root up the infernal grove,
Then shall we return and see
The worlds of happy Eternity'—

sang the car, as she ran across the Rother Marshes into Sussex—where the villages of Northiam and Beckley and Peasmarsh were threaded on the road like beads on a string.

Well, she had lived through three years of it, and only the first had been worth living. The others had been hell. However, they had done her this service in showing her the kind of husband he would have made—weak, selfish, unreliable—how dreadful it sounded! But it was true.

It was true, too, that she had loved him in spite of it all. He was so attractive. But she was glad she had not married him . . . though she would never forget the day he had told her he could not marry her, bringing forward long strings of figures and talks of mortgages and his plans for the farm, and other things which she could not understand. What a fool she had been not to finish it all that day! That was when she ought to have broken with him and spared herself all this.

What had made her stick to him?—love or hope? Had she hoped that her love would make him change his mind, change his fate, and marry her after all? Hadn't she all along been hoping that he would marry her in the end?

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Didn't she hope it still? O God! What it is to have a patient, indestructible hope! And wouldn't it be degrading as well as foolish to marry him after all that had happened? Hang it all, he had treated her badly from the start . . . a woman like herself, desirable, well-connected, who had been sought by others . . . to condemn her to this unutterable life, just so as he could be free and spend money and buy land. It was monstrous! She owed it to her dignity to end things at once.

‘And throughout all eternity
I forgive you, you forgive me—
As our dear Redeemer said,
This is the wine and this the bread’—

sang the car, taking her through Peasmarsh.

She would soon be in Rye. Already the fields were falling away to the south-east. She saw the blue line of the sea, and then the green vastness of the marsh spreading away into veiled distances.

From the ridge it looked like a huge map, marked out with roads and water-courses, with dots of roofs and steeples. She saw the foot of the Isle of Oxney—she saw the abrupt hillock of Stone with its square church-tower. . . . When she was free she would go to church again. . . .

Now she was entering Rye, and for a few relieving moments her mind was fixed on manœuvring the car through the narrow streets. Now she was out of the town, rushing along the straight mile . . . zip-zip—let her out—open the throttle wide—zip-zip—thirty coming round on the speedometer tape—thirty-five. Oh, if only I can get her up to forty, Laurie will have a reasonable excuse that I can accept . . . zip-zip—Guldeford corner—I must slow down . . . and of course I won't accept any excuse . . . I'm going to be free.

Now she was nearing Warehorne she began to feel afraid. It would be a very terrible meeting—it would make

her sick. And suppose he had taken the matter out of her hands and had decided to get rid of her—suppose she found a message from him telling her all was over! It would be a cruel way of doing things, but then men were often cruel when they were frightened . . . or angry . . . angry with themselves. Besides, what else could have happened?—what else could account for his silence, except a definite determination to break with her? . . . Unless he was dead. O God, Laurie dead!

Then a new fear attacked her. What should she say to the parlourmaid when she arrived? If he was away from home, she didn't want the girl to think that she had come to lunch. She must put on speed and arrive well before the luncheon-hour—she must put on a careless and haphazard manner as if she'd called in on the chance. Yet, if he was expecting her and had told the servants, it would look queer if she seemed undecided herself. . . .

Both these fears—the big that made her feel sick and the little that made her feel silly—went with her all the way to Warehorne. Her hand on the steering-wheel was clammy, her foot shook on the accelerator. What a pitiful spectacle is a woman driving a motor-car when she's in love!

By the time she had reached the house she had made up her mind to be casual—better that the maid should think her foolish than disappointed.

Agney House stood just outside the village—it was really a glorified farm—in the midst of its steading, a red, comfortable, seventeenth-century house, with staring white-rimmed windows. It looked prosperous—exceedingly prosperous for a man who professed himself too poor to marry; but of course the prosperity was in the house only, and the penury was in the land, the land which Laurie refused to give up for her sake.

She was on the doorstep. Her tongue was thick and her mouth was dry. In a minute now she would know.

'Is Mr. Laurence Holt at Warehorne?'

'Yes, ma'am. But he's gone over to Brenzett on business.'

'When will he be back?'

'He said about three o'clock.'

'Then he's not lunching at home.'

'No, ma'am; he's lunching at Mr. Staple's.'

'I see. But he'll be back at three.'

'Yes, ma'am. Shall I give him any message?'

'No—that's to say—yes, tell him Miss Armstrong called, and that she'll call again later in the afternoon. Tell him it's on urgent business.'

'Very well, ma'am.'

The girl was a new importation—she suspected nothing. Joyce had saved her face, but nothing else.

She mechanically got into the car—as part of her programme of casualness she had left the engine running—and drove round the little sweep and out of the gate. Mechanically she turned to the right, into the village. Everything she did was mechanical. Her brain felt rigid, frozen—ossified—she could not think.

Then suddenly she began to feel, in furious throes. She felt anger, bewilderment, grief, despair—so violently that she had to bring the car to a standstill.

She was trembling all over. This was worse than anything she had expected. Laurie was at home, but had gone out to lunch with someone else on the day he had invited her to come to him. He could not have forgotten their arrangement. No, that was impossible. He must have meant to slight her, to show her in this incredibly male, clumsy way that all was over between them.

What should she do?—for nothing was certain. How should she act? For the first time she knew the meaning of the expression 'at your wits' end'.

Should she go home? No, that was impossible. What explanation could she make to her mother or Lilian Smith? Besides, she would be condemning herself to long

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days of uncertainty. She could not endure that. Should she drive to Mr. Staples and demand to see Laurie? In her desperation, she felt inclined to do that. She had a right to make a fuss, to make things hot for him. He mustn't expect her always to take everything lying down.

But something at the bottom of her heart restrained her from exposing herself. Better far wait till he came home, and see him there. She could manage to fill in the time somehow till three o'clock.

What should she do? Lunch was out of the question—she could not eat. Neither could she sit still. A terrible restlessness was in all her limbs—her anxiety translated into terms of motion. She would drive out somewhere in the car, drive really far and really fast, fill up all the hours with speed.

There was a wide space to turn in outside the church, and she swung round, the nose of her car pointing towards the sea. A long, white, flat road ran out into flat distances. It was the road to New Romney, so she was told by the sign-post, and she set out along it, with the throttle well open.

Oh, she was thankful she had got the car, that she could fill her waiting-time with fierce activity and the lull of motion, and yet was not required to support herself on legs that were weak and shaking. Her speedometer showed her that she had already come twenty-five miles, and there would of course be twenty-five miles home. By driving out seawards she would probably add thirty miles to her day's tally, and fifty was quite enough for her unskilled driving. But she did not care. She must go—she could not live through time without the help of space.

She had never been out on the seaward side of the marsh, knowing only the road between Rye and Warehorne. Soon a toll-gate pulled her up. 'Sixpence . . . Thank you. . . .' Craunch—another noisy change—and how her leg was shaking as she put out the clutch!

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'How many miles to New Romney?
Scarcely more than ten.
Shall I get there by three o'clock?
Yes, and back again.'

She mustn't be later than three, or he might have gone out again. She had better be there at a quarter to three. She could contrive to sit still for a quarter of an hour.

The marsh felt very huge, lying there all around her, misty, flat, and green. It was foreign—unlike the country round Hawkhurst, which was all little hills covered with spinneys and fields, and farms with fairy names.

Here the farms were set far apart among sheep-dotted miles of pasture. Their roofs were immensely steep and high, and yellowed over with sea-lichen, and their ricks were thatched with osiers. She passed an enormous church standing between two farms. A few miles farther on she passed another, standing among some tiny cottages which could easily have been packed into its aisles. She thought of Brookland Church and the colour left her face.

It was in Brookland tower, all among the salt-riddled oak beams, that he had first told her that he loved her, holding her to him in the darkness. She had not been surprised. For several days she had been expecting, hoping he would speak, and now at last he had spoken . . . at least, he had not spoken—his lips had given her kisses instead of words. But she had understood—or rather, she had not understood. She had thought he had wanted to marry her; it was not till quite a week later that she discovered he did not.

'O stop your ringing and let me be—
Let, be O Brookland bells—
You'll ring Old Goodman out of the sea
Before I wed one else.

'Old Goodman's farm is rank sea sand
And was this thousand year.

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But it shall turn to rich plough-land
Before I change my dear.'

That was the way her little car, rushing and humming along, always set her thoughts to music. But this was a silly song—because she was going to change her dear that very evening. She had made up her mind. Weakness hitherto had been her fault, but now she would be firm. She could bear no more.

How many times had she told herself that since the beginning? The first year had been beautiful, full of happiness, in spite of some twinges of conscience and the stinging of the lies she had to tell. By the second year he had grown casual and remiss, but she had borne with him, knowing that it was his nature, and having always understood that men don't bother about little things the way women do. In the third year he had been unfaithful to her, but she had forgiven him, because she had always understood that men were liable to these attacks. Besides, she could not do without him. . . .

What had happened that she could do without him now? A lot had happened—her heart was dead. He had slowly killed her heart. She did not love him any more. No, she didn't, she didn't, she didn't!

The flat horizon was growing rough. A great shaggy wood spread across it, out of which a tower rose. Here was New Romney and the marsh's edge. Should she turn before going into the town? What time was it? Nearly two. She had better turn. It would be too dreadful if she were late and missed him. She would turn at the next cross-roads.

A sign-post said—to New Romney: to Ivychurch: to Lydd. She stopped the car and backed up the Lydd road. She did it clumsily and blocked the way. A little boy on a bicycle squeezed past. He turned round and smiled at her—not mockingly, but encouragingly and kindly. The smile at once comforted and melted her; she felt grateful for this unknown being's token of goodwill.

Back again . . . back over the same road she had come. The bonnet of her car running before her was like the nose of a living thing; the top of the radiator was like a funny little inquiring snout. If only her car was alive and loved her, how happy she would be!

She was a big fool. But oh, she did want a little love—a little affectionate, tender love—love that never demanded anything. She did not think she had ever had it. Of course there was her mother. She would love her mother when she was Free.

Well, to-day wouldn't be wasted now, for all its anguish—at the end of it she would be Free. No longer would she have to tell lies, no longer would she have to wrestle with circumstances, no longer would she have to run after Laurie, either drawn by his whims or driven by her longings. Free . . . free. . . . He had set her free at last—kicked her out, put her on the pavement—but she was free.

'There's no good, Laurie—it really is done—finished this time. You don't love me. You wouldn't treat me like this if you did . . .'

Ah, here was the toll-gate. How much quicker she seemed to have come back. Another sixpence. . . . The girl said, 'If I'd seen who it was, I'd have let you through. We're not supposed to, but——'

Another kind creature. Joyce wanted to thank her, but instead she said in her heart to Laurie, 'No, this time I really will not pass it over. It's nothing to me if you care for this woman or not. You can take her, or nobody; you're not going to have me. Of course, I will always be your friend'—no, she was done with him—for good—till she was fifty at any rate. Then perhaps . . . no, not even then.

Lord! There he was in the road in front of her. She recognised his jaunty step, his familiar tweed suit, the way

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he flourished his stick instead of walking with it like other men. He must have left Mr. Staples earlier than he had intended.

What should she do? Pass him carelessly by? That might hurt. No, she must speak to him, otherwise the break would not be definite. She would leave no raw edges. She would cut—clean.

She sounded her horn as she drew even with him, ran on a few yards ahead, and then stopped. Without getting out of the car she turned and faced him. She saw the recognition dawn in his eyes, without reproach or fear.

‘Dearest child. . . .’

He came up to her, and was in the car beside her before she could speak.

‘Laurie . . .’ she said faintly.

‘Start away, dear, and drive me home. You’ll come in for a few minutes, won’t you?’

‘Laurie—didn’t you know I was coming to-day? Weren’t you expecting me? You’d asked me to lunch.’

She saw his face grow blank—his brown, speckled eyes looked vacantly into hers. It was only for a second, but in that second such an agony of realisation rushed over her as almost to deprive her of consciousness. She knew that he had forgotten. All her wild conjectures of unfaithfulness, urgent business, or determined slight were beside the mark. He had made no effort to shake her off, to break bad news; his absence had been no part of a plan either cruel or compassionate. He had simply forgotten all about her.

‘My dear,’ he was saying, ‘how absolutely dreadful!—how perfectly awful of me! But surely we didn’t fix anything definite. I said I’d let you know.’

‘No, you didn’t’—she spoke gruffly—‘it was fixed. Don’t you remember? You said your people would be away, and we’d have a whole lovely day together. We’d go over to St. Mary’s . . .’ Her voice broke.

‘Yes—of course. . . .’ He was beginning to be embar-

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rassed—‘Mind the gate-post’—she nearly struck it as she swung the car into the sweep. ‘I’m awfully sorry, Joyce. You came all this way and I was out. You make me feel dreadful.’

He got out and opened the door for her. She followed him into the familiar room, half office, half study—she sank down in an armchair and burst into tears.

‘Joyce—darling—don’t. Don’t be so upset about it—it’s only a little thing.’

‘A little thing! . . . Oh! . . . and I’ve been thinking all sorts of things about you—that you’d thrown me over—that you were dead, even—but this is worse, worse than anything I’d imagined. . . .’

‘Worse! My dear girl, don’t be hysterical.’

He came over to her and tried to pull her hands down from her eyes.

‘Don’t—you don’t love me, or you couldn’t have forgotten me. And you haven’t written, either—not for ten days.’

‘I’d nothing to write about . . . and I was waiting till I was sure about to-day.’ He was tying two lies together.

‘Laurie, don’t tell me you’d have forgotten about me, if you loved me as much as you used to.’

‘But I do love you just as much.’ Again he tried to pull away her hands.

‘You don’t.’

‘I do.’

‘You don’t.’ This wasn’t what she had meant to say, how she had intended the interview to go off.

He slipped his arm round her, and in spite of her resistance, drew her head to his shoulder as he knelt beside her.

‘Oh, Joyce, darling, don’t be angry. Don’t let’s quarrel over this. Surely we know each other well enough not to be upset by an accident.’

‘An accident! Oh, Laurie, if you knew what I’ve suffered—what I’ve thought. . . .’

'But it's all over now. Oh, do be generous and forgive me.'

'But it will happen again—something like it. Laurie, I can't bear any more . . . and I mean, what am I bearing it for?—where is all this leading us?'

'What d'you mean, dear?'

'I mean—are—are we just going on like this until one of us marries someone else?'

'My dear child, I've told you that I can't marry you. Don't let's go over all that again.'

'But I don't understand. . . .'

He had risen, and was walking about the room.

'Dearest, can't you let that alone? Can't we love each other as we used to do, without worrying about what may happen years ahead?'

'But we don't love each other as we used to do. Oh, Laurie, I won't say you love me less, but you love me differently. You forget me. I could bear it if I thought it was . . . I mean if we were going to be . . . if I'd something to look forward to. But if I have to bear it in vain——'

'In vain! So this is "in vain," Joyce—all our love, all our friendship, all the heavenly moments we've had together?—it's all in vain, if you haven't something material to look forward to. Is that what you mean?'

'Oh, no, no!'

'Then what in God's name do you mean?'

She wished she knew. She wished she had said the things she had meant to say—done what she had meant to do. His sin against her was even worse than she had imagined, and yet . . . Free . . . the things she had meant to do when she was Free. . . . But she would be Free. Even the sight of him there before her in all his alert and lovely strength should not cheat her of her freedom. She sprang to her feet.

'Laurie, I'm not going on with it—I can't. I can't bear . . . I'm going to be free.'

His arms were round her—her words were choked out against his breast. The smell of his tweed coat seemed to stifle her. She felt his warmth and strength, his arm upholding her. His lips were warm against her ear, murmuring tenderly and reproachfully:

‘Oh, you silly little thing—you don’t know what you’re saying. You’re going to forgive me, and love me more than ever. Of course you are. You’re upset with the heat.’

Then her spirit fainted. She did not know whether she despaired more of him or of herself. He tilted back her unresisting head, and his lips came down upon hers, the seal of her bondage. ‘Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him—until seven times?’ . . . ‘Not until seven times but unto seventy times seven . . . unto seven hundred and seventy times seven . . . unto the bitter end. . . .’

Tired . . . tired. That was the only refrain her car had for her on the journey home. No more furious thinking, no more furious rhymes, only tired . . . tired . . . exhausted, eighty-seven miles on the speedometer. Tired . . . tired. . . .

Home at last.

‘Well, dear, have you had a nice day?’

‘Yes, mother, thank you—a lovely day.’

BY
A. E. W. MASON



THE CLOCK

MR. TWISS was a great walker, and it was his habit, after his day's work was done, to walk from his pleasant office in the Adelphi to his home at Hampstead. On an afternoon he was detained to a later hour than usual by one of his clients, a Captain Brayton, over some matter of a mortgage. Mr. Twiss looked at his office clock.

'You are going west, I suppose,' he said. 'I wonder if you would walk with me as far as Piccadilly? It will not be very much out of your way, and I have a reason for wishing your company.'

'By all means,' replied Captain Brayton, and the two men set forth.

Mr. Twiss, however, seemed in a difficulty as to how he should broach his subject, and for a while the pair walked in silence. They, indeed, reached Pall Mall, and were walking down that broad thoroughfare, before a word of any importance was uttered. And even then it was chance which furnished the occasion. A young man of Captain Brayton's age came down from the steps of a club and walked towards them. As he passed beneath a street lamp, Mr. Twiss noticed his face, and ever so slightly started with surprise. At almost the same moment, the young man swerved across the road at a run, as though suddenly he remembered a very pressing appointment.

The two men walked on again for a few paces, and then Captain Brayton observed: 'There is a screw loose there, I am afraid.'

Mr. Twiss shook his head.

'I am sorry to hear you say so,' he replied. 'It was, indeed, about Archie Cranfield that I was anxious to speak to you. I promised his father that I would be something more than Archie's mere man of affairs, if I were allowed, and I confess that I am troubled by him. You know him well?'

Captain Brayton nodded his head.

'Perhaps I should say that I did know him well,' he returned. 'We were at the same school, we passed through Chatham together, but since he has relinquished actual service we have seen very little of one another.' Here he hesitated, but eventually made up his mind to continue in a guarded fashion. 'Also, I am bound to admit that there has been cause for disagreement. We quarrelled.'

Mr. Twiss was disappointed. 'Then you can tell me nothing of him recently?' he asked, and Captain Brayton shrugged his shoulders.

'Nothing but what all the little world of his acquaintances already knows. He has grown solitary, forbidding in his manner, and, what is most noticeable, sly—extraordinarily sly. While he is speaking with you, he will smile at some secret thought of his; the affairs of the world have lost their interest for him; he hardly listens and seldom speaks. He is concerned with some private matter and he hides it cunningly. That is the character, at all events, which his friends give him.'

They had now reached the corner of St. James's Street, and as they turned up the hill, Mr. Twiss took up the tale.

'I am not surprised at what you tell me. It is a great pity, for we both remember him ambitious and a good soldier. I am inclined to blame the house in the country for the change in him.'

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Captain Brayton, however, did not agree.

'It goes deeper than that,' he said. 'Men who live alone in the country may show furtive ways in towns, no doubt. But why does he live alone in the country? No, that will not do'; and at the top of St. James's Street the two men parted.

Mr. Twiss walked up Bond Street, and the memory of that house in the country in which Archie Cranfield chose to bury himself kept him company. Mr. Twiss had travelled down into the eastern counties to see it for himself one Saturday afternoon when Cranfield was away from home, and a walk of six miles from the station had taken him to its door. It stood upon the borders of Essex and Suffolk, a small Elizabethan house backed upon the Stour, a place of black beams and low ceilings and great fireplaces. It had been buttressed behind, where the ground ran down to the river-bank, and hardly a window was on a level with its neighbour.

A picturesque place enough, but Mr. Twiss was a lover of towns and of paved footways and illuminated streets. He imagined it on such an evening as this, dark, and the rain dripping cheerlessly from the trees. He imagined its inmate crouching over the fire with his sly smile upon his face; and of a sudden the picture took on a sinister look, and a strong sense of discomfort made Mr. Twiss cast an uneasy glance behind him. He had in his pocket a letter of instructions from Archie Cranfield, bidding him buy the house outright with its furniture, since it had now all come into the market.

It was a week after this when next Captain Brayton came to Mr. Twiss's office, and, their business done, he spoke of his own accord of Archie Cranfield.

'I am going to stay with him,' he said. 'He wrote to me on the night of the day when we passed him in Pall Mall. He told me that he would make up a small bachelor party. I am very glad, for, to tell the truth, our quarrel was a

sufficiently serious one, and here, it seems, is the end to it.'

Mr. Twiss was delighted, and shook his client warmly by the hand.

'You shall bring me news of Archie Cranfield,' he said—'better news than I have,' he added, with a sudden gravity upon his face. For in making the arrangements for the purchase of the house, he had come into contact with various neighbours of Archie Cranfield, and from all of them he had had but one report. Cranfield had a bad name in those parts. There were no particular facts given to account for his reputation; it was all elusive and vague, an impression conveyed by Archie Cranfield himself, by something strange and sly in his demeanour. He would sit chuckling in a sort of triumph, to which no one had the clue, or, on the other hand, he fell into deep silences like a man with a trouble on his mind.

'Be sure you come to see me when you return,' said Mr. Twiss, and Captain Brayton replied heartily: 'Surely I will.'

But he never did. For in a few days the newspapers were busy with the strange enigma of his death.

The first hint of this enigma was conveyed to Mr. Twiss late one night at his private address. It came in the shape of a telegram from Archie Cranfield, which seemed to the agitated solicitor rather a cry of distress than a message sent across the wires.

'Come at once. I am in terrible need.'—CRANFIELD.'

There were no trains at so late an hour by which Mr. Twiss could reach his client; he must needs wait until the morning. He travelled, however, by the first train from Liverpool Street. Although the newspapers were set out upon the bookstall, not one of them contained a word of anything amiss at Archie Cranfield's house, and Mr. Twiss began to breathe more freely. It was too early for a cab to be in waiting at the station, and Mr. Twiss set out to walk the six miles. It was a fine, clear morning of

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November; but for the want of leaves and birds, and the dull look of the countryside, Mr. Twiss might have believed the season to be June. His spirits rose as he walked, his blood warmed to a comfortable glow, and by the time he came to the gates of the house, Cranfield's summons had become a trifling thing.

As he walked up to the door, however, his mood changed, for every blind in the house was drawn. The door was opened before he could touch the bell, and it was opened by Cranfield himself. His face was pale and disordered, his manner that of a man at his wits' end.

'What has happened?' asked Mr. Twiss as he entered the hall.

'A terrible thing!' replied Cranfield. 'It's Brayton. Have you breakfasted? I suppose not. Come, and I will tell you while you eat.'

He walked up and down the room while Mr. Twiss ate his breakfast, and gradually, by question and by answer, the story took shape. Corroboration was easy and was secured. There was no real dispute about the facts; they were simple and clear.

There were two other visitors in the house besides Captain Brayton, one a barrister named Henry Chalmers, and the second, William Linfield, a man about town, as the phrase goes. Both men stood in much the same relationship to Archie Cranfield as Captain Brayton did—that is to say, they were old friends who had seen little of their host of late, and were somewhat surprised to receive his invitation after so long an interval. They had accepted it in the same spirit as Brayton, and the three men arrived together on Wednesday evening.

On Thursday the party of four shot over some turnip fields and a few clumps of wood which belonged to the house, and played a game of bridge in the evening. In the opinion of all, Brayton was never in better spirits. On Friday the four men shot again and returned to the house

as darkness was coming on. They took tea in the smoking-room, and after tea Brayton declared his intention to write some letters before dinner. He went upstairs to his room for that purpose.

The other three men remained in the smoking-room. Of that there was no doubt. Both Chalmers and Linfield were emphatic upon the point. Chalmers, in particular, said:

‘We sat talking on a well-worn theme, I in a chair on one side of the fireplace, Archie Cranfield in another opposite to me, and Linfield sitting on the edge of the billiard-table between us. How the subject cropped up I cannot remember, but I found myself arguing that most men hid their real selves all their lives even from their most intimate friends, that there were secret chambers in a man’s consciousness wherein he lived a different life from that which the world saw and knew, and that it was only by some rare mistake the portals of that chamber were ever passed by any other man.

‘Linfield would not hear of it. If this hidden man were the real man, he held, in some way or another the reality would triumph, and some vague suspicion of the truth would in the end be felt by all his intimates. I upheld my view by instances from the courts of law, Linfield his by the aid of a generous imagination, while Cranfield looked from one to the other of us with his sly, mocking smile. I turned to him, indeed, in some heat.

‘“Well, since you appear to know, Cranfield, tell me which of us is right,” and his pipe fell from his fingers and broke upon the hearth. He stood up, with his face grown white and his lips drawn back from his teeth in a kind of snarl.

‘“What do you mean by that?” he asked; and before I could answer, the door was thrown violently open, and Cranfield’s manservant burst into the room. He mastered himself enough to say:

‘“May I speak to you, sir?”

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‘Cranfield went outside the door with him. He could not have moved six paces from the door, for though he closed it behind him, we heard the sound of his voice and of his servant’s speaking in low tones. Moreover, there was no appreciable moment of time between the cessation of the voices and Cranfield’s reappearance in the room. He came back to the fireplace and said very quietly:

‘“I have something terrible to tell you. Brayton has shot himself.”

‘He then glanced from Linfield’s face to mine, and sat down in a chair heavily. Then he crouched over the fire shivering. Both Linfield and myself were too shocked by the news to say a word for a moment or two. Then Linfield asked:

‘“But is he dead?”

‘“Humphreys says so,” Cranfield returned. “I have telephoned to the police and to the doctor.”

‘“But we had better go upstairs ourselves and see,” said I. And we did.’

Thus Chalmers. Humphreys, the manservant, gave the following account:

‘The bell rang from Captain Brayton’s room at half-past five. I answered it at once myself, and Captain Brayton asked me at what hour the post left. I replied that we sent the letters from the house to the post-office in the village at six. He then asked me to return at that hour and fetch those of his which would be ready. I returned precisely at six, and I saw Captain Brayton lying in a heap upon the rug in front of the fire. He was dead, and he held a revolver tightly clenched in his hand. As I stepped over him, I smelt that something was burning. He had shot himself through the heart, and his clothes were singed, as if he had held the revolver close to his side.’

These stories were repeated at the inquest, and at this particular point in Humphrey’s evidence the coroner asked a question:

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These stories were repeated at the inquest, and at this particular point in Humphrey’s evidence the coroner asked a question:

'Did you recognise the revolver?'

'Not until Captain Brayton's hand was unclenched.'

'But then you did?'

'Yes,' said Humphreys.

The coroner pointed to the table on which a revolver lay.

'Is that the weapon?'

Humphreys took it up and looked at the handle, on which two initials were engraved—'A.C.'

'Yes,' said the man. 'I recognised it as Mr. Cranfield's. He kept it in a drawer by his bedside.'

No revolver was found amongst Captain Brayton's possessions.

It became clear that, while the three men were talking in the billiard-room, Captain Brayton had gone to Cranfield's room, taken his revolver, and killed himself with it. No evidence, however, was produced which supplied a reason for Brayton's suicide. His affairs were in good order, his means sufficient, his prospects of advancement in his career sound. Nor was there a suggestion of any private unhappiness. The tragedy, therefore, was entered in that list of mysteries which are held insoluble.

'I might,' said Chalmers, 'perhaps resume the argument which Humphreys interrupted in the billiard-room, with a better instance than any which I adduced—the instance of Captain Brayton.'

'You won't go?' Archie Cranfield pleaded with Mr. Twiss. 'Linfield and Chalmers leave to-day. If you go too, I shall be entirely alone.'

'But why should you stay?' the lawyer returned. 'Surely you hardly propose to remain through the winter in this house.'

'No, but I must stay on for a few days; I have to make arrangements before I can go,' said Cranfield; and seeing that he was in earnest in his intention to go, Mr. Twiss was persuaded. He stayed on, and recognised, in conse-

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quence, that the death of Captain Brayton had amongst its consequences one which he had not expected. The feeling in the neighbourhood changed towards Archie Cranfield. It cannot be said that he became popular—he wore too sad and joyless an air—but sympathy was shown to him in many acts of courtesy and in a greater charity of language.

A retired Admiral, of a strong political complexion, who had been one of the foremost to dislike Archie Cranfield, called, indeed, to offer his condolences. Archie Cranfield did not see him, but Mr. Twiss walked down the drive with him to the gate.

‘It’s hard on Cranfield,’ said the Admiral. ‘We all admit it. It wasn’t fair of Brayton to take his host’s revolver. But for the accident that Cranfield was in the billiard-room with Linfield and Chalmers, the affair might have taken on quite an ugly look. We all feel that in the neighbourhood, and we shall make it up to Cranfield. Just tell him that, Mr. Twiss, if you will.’

‘It is very kind of you all, I am sure,’ replied Mr. Twiss, ‘but I think Cranfield will not continue to live here. The death of Captain Brayton has been too much of a shock for him.’

Mr. Twiss said ‘Good-bye’ to the Admiral at the gate, and returned to the house. He was not easy in his mind, and as he walked round the lawn under the great trees, he cried to himself:

‘It is lucky, indeed, that Archie Cranfield was in the billiard-room with Linfield and Chalmers; otherwise, heaven knows what I might have been brought to believe myself.’

The two men had quarrelled; Brayton himself had imparted that piece of knowledge to Mr. Twiss. Then there was the queer change in Archie Cranfield’s character, which had made for him enemies of strangers, and strangers of his friends—the slyness, the love of solitude, the

indifference to the world, the furtive smile as of a man conscious of secret powers, the whole indescribable uncanniness of him. Mr. Twiss marshalled his impressions and stopped in the avenue.

'I should have had no just grounds for any suspicion,' he concluded, 'but I cannot say that I should not have suspected,' and slowly he went on to the door.

He walked through the house into the billiard-room, and so became the witness of an incident which caused him an extraordinary disquiet. The room was empty. Mr. Twiss lit his pipe and took down a book from one of the shelves. A bright fire glowed upon the hearth, and drawing up a chair to the fender, he settled down to read. But the day was dull, and the fireplace stood at the dark end of the room. Mr. Twiss carried his book over to the window, which was a bay window with a broad seat.

Now, the curtains were hung at the embrasure of the window, so that, when they were drawn, they shut the bay off altogether from the room, and when they were open, as now, they still concealed the corners of the window-seats. It was in one of these corners that Mr. Twiss took his seat, and there he read quietly for the space of five minutes.

At the end of that time he heard the latch of the door click, and looking out from his position behind the curtain, he saw the door slowly open. Archie Cranfield came through the doorway into the room, and shut the door behind him. Then he stood for a while by the door, very still, but breathing heavily.

Mr. Twiss was on the point of coming forward and announcing his presence, but there was something so strange and secret in Cranfield's behaviour that, in spite of certain twinges of conscience, he remained hidden in his seat. He did more than remain hidden. He made a chink between the curtain and the wall, and watched. He saw Cranfield move swiftly over to the fireplace, seize a little

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old-fashioned clock in a case of satin-wood which stood upon the mantelshelf, raise it in the air, and dash it with an ungovernable fury on to the stone hearth.

Having done this unaccountable thing, Cranfield dropped into the chair which Mr. Twiss had drawn up. He covered his face with his hands and suddenly began to sob and wail in the most dreadful fashion, rocking his body from side to side in a very paroxysm of grief. Mr. Twiss was at his wits' end to know what to do. He felt that to catch a man sobbing would be to earn his undying resentment. Yet the sound was so horrible, and produced in him so sharp a discomfort and distress, that, on the other hand, he could hardly keep still. The paroxysm passed, however, almost as quickly as it had come, and Cranfield, springing to his feet, rang the bell. Humphreys answered it.

'I have knocked the clock off the mantelshelf with my elbow, Humphreys,' he said. 'I am afraid that it is broken, and the glass might cut somebody's hand. Would you mind clearing the pieces away?'

He went out of the room, and Humphreys went off for a dust-pan. Mr. Twiss was able to escape from the billiard-room unnoticed. But it was a long time before he recovered from the uneasiness which the incident aroused in him.

Four days later the two men left the house together. The servants had been paid off. Humphreys had gone with the luggage to London by an earlier train. Mr. Twiss and Archie Cranfield were the last to go. Cranfield turned the key in the lock of the front door as they stood upon the steps.

'I shall never see the inside of that house again,' he said with a gusty violence.

'Will you allow me to get rid of it for you?' asked Mr. Twiss; and for a moment Cranfield looked at him with knotted brows, blowing the while into the wards of the key.

'No,' he said at length, and, running down to the stream at the back of the house, he tossed the key into the water. 'No,' he repeated sharply; 'let the house rot empty as it stands. The rats shall have their will of it, and the sooner the better.'

He walked quickly to the gate, with Mr. Twiss at his heels, and as they covered the six miles to the railway station very little was said between them.

Time ran on, and Mr. Twiss was a busy man. The old house by the Stour began to vanish from his memory amongst the mists and the veils of rain which so often enshrouded it.

Even the enigma of Captain Brayton's death was ceasing to perplex him, when the whole affair was revived in the most startling fashion. A labourer, making a short cut to his work one summer morning, passed through the grounds of Cranfield's closed and shuttered house. His way led him round the back of the building, and as he came to that corner where the great brick buttresses kept the house from slipping down into the river, he saw below him, at the edge of the water, a man sleeping. The man's back was turned towards him; he was lying half upon his side, half upon his face. The labourer, wondering who it was, went down to the river-bank, and the first thing he noticed was a revolver lying upon the grass, its black barrel and handle shining in the morning sunlight. The labourer turned the sleeper over on his back. There was some blood upon the left breast of his waistcoat. The sleeper was dead, and from the rigidity of the body had been dead for some hours. The labourer ran back to the village with the astounding news that he had found Mr. Cranfield shot through the heart at the back of his own empty house.

People at first jumped naturally to the belief that murder had been done. The more judicious, however, shook their heads. Not a door nor a window was open in the

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house. When the locks were forced, it was seen that the dust lay deep on floor and chair and table, and nowhere was there any mark of a hand or a foot. Outside the house, too, in the long neglected grass, there were but two sets of footsteps visible, one set leading round the house—the marks made by the labourer on his way to his work—the other set leading directly to the spot where Archie Cranfield's body was found lying. Rumours, each contradicting the other, flew from cottage to cottage, and the men gathered about the police-station and in the street waiting for the next. In an hour or two, however, the mystery was at an end. It leaked out that upon Archie Cranfield's body a paper had been discovered, signed in his hand and by his name, with these words:

'I have shot myself with the same revolver with which I murdered Captain Brayton.'

The statement created some stir when it was read out in the billiard-room, where the coroner held his inquest. But the coroner who presided now was the man who had held the court when Captain Brayton had been shot. He was quite clear in his recollection of that case.

'Mr. Cranfield's alibi on that occasion,' he said, 'was incontrovertible. Mr. Cranfield was with two friends in this very room when Captain Brayton shot himself in his bedroom. There can be no doubt of that.' And under his direction the jury returned a verdict of 'Suicide while of unsound mind.'

Mr. Twiss attended the inquest and funeral. But though he welcomed the verdict, at the bottom of his mind he was uneasy. He remembered vividly that extraordinary moment when he had seen Cranfield creep into the billiard-room, lift the little clock in its case of satinwood high above his head, and dash it down upon the hearth in a wild gust of fury. He recollected how the fury had given way to despair—if it were despair and not remorse. He saw again Archie Cranfield dropping into the chair,

holding his head and rocking his body in a paroxysm of sobs. The sound of his wailing rang horribly once more in the ears of Mr. Twiss. He was not satisfied.

‘What should take Cranfield back to that deserted house, there to end his life, if not remorse,’ he asked himself—‘remorse for some evil done there?’

Over that question for some days he shook his head, finding it waiting for him at his fireside and lurking for him at the corner of the roads, as he took his daily walk between Hampstead and his office. It began to poison his life, a life of sane and customary ways, with eerie suggestions. There was an oppression upon his heart of which he could not rid it. On the outskirts of his pleasant world dim horrors loomed; he seemed to walk upon a frail crust, fearful of what lay beneath. The sly smile, the furtive triumph, the apparent consciousness of secret power—did they point to some corruption of the soul in Cranfield, of which none knew but he himself?

‘At all events, he paid for it,’ Mr. Twiss would insist, and from that reflection drew, after all, but little comfort. The riddle began even to invade his business hours, and take a seat within his private office, silently clamouring for his attention. So that it was with a veritable relief that he heard one morning from his clerk that a man called Humphreys wished particularly to see him.

‘Show him in,’ cried Mr. Twiss, and for his own ear he added: ‘Now I shall know.’

Humphreys entered the room with a letter in his hand. He laid the letter on the office table. Mr. Twiss saw at a glance that it was addressed in Archie Cranfield’s hand. He flung himself upon it and snatched it up. It was sealed by Cranfield’s seal. It was addressed to himself, with a note upon the left-hand corner of the envelope: ‘To be delivered after my death.’

Mr. Twiss turned sternly to the man.

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‘Why did you not bring it before?’

‘Mr. Cranfield told me to wait a month,’ Humphreys replied.

Mr. Twiss took a turn across the room with the letter in his hand.

‘Then you knew,’ he cried, ‘that your master meant to kill himself? You knew, and remained silent?’

‘No, sir, I did not know,’ Humphreys replied firmly. ‘Mr. Cranfield gave me the letter, saying that he had a long railway journey in front of him. He was smiling when he gave it me. I can remember the words with which he gave it: “They offer you an insurance ticket at the booking-office, when they sell you your travelling ticket, so there is always, I suppose, a little risk. And it is of the utmost importance to me that, in the event of my death, this should reach Mr. Twiss.” He spoke so lightly that I could not have guessed what was on his mind, nor, do I think, sir, could you.’

Mr. Twiss dismissed the man and summoned his clerk. ‘I shall not be in to anyone this afternoon,’ he said. He broke the seal and drew some closely written sheets of notepaper from the envelope. He spread the sheets in front of him with a trembling hand.

‘Heaven knows in what spirit and with what knowledge I shall rise from my reading,’ he thought; and looking out of his pleasant window upon the barges swinging down the river on the tide, he was in half a mind to fling the sheets of paper into the fire. ‘But I shall be plagued with that question all my life,’ he added, and he bent his head over his desk and read.

‘My dear Friend,—I am writing down for you the facts. I am not offering any explanation, for I have none to give. You will probably rise up, after reading this letter, quite incredulous, and with the conviction in your mind that you have been reading the extravagancies of a madman. And I wish with all my heart that you could be right. But

you are not. I have come to the end to-day. I am writing the last words I ever shall write, and therefore I am not likely to write a lie.

‘You will remember the little manor-house on the borders of Essex, for you were always opposed to my purchase of it. You were like the British jury, my friend. Your conclusion was sound, but your reason for it very far from the mark. You disliked it for its isolation and the melancholy of its dripping trees, and I know not what other town-bred reasonings. I will give you a more solid cause.

‘Picture to yourself the billiard-room and how it was furnished when I first took the house—the raised settee against the wall, the deep leather chairs by the fire, the high fender, and on the mantelshelf—what?—a little old-fashioned clock in a case of satinwood. You probably never noticed it. I did from the first evenings which I passed in the house. For I spent those evenings alone, smoking my pipe by the fire.

‘It had a queer trick. For a while it would tick almost imperceptibly, and then, without reason, quite suddenly, the noise would become loud and hollow, as though the pendulum in its swing struck against the wooden case. To anyone sitting alone for hours in the room, as I did, this tick had the queerest effect. The clock almost became endowed with human qualities. At one time it seemed to wish to attract one’s attention, at another time to avoid it. For more than once, disturbed by the louder knocking, I rose and moved the clock. At once the knocking would cease, to begin again when I had settled afresh to my book, in a kind of tentative, secret way, as though it would accustom my ears to the sound, and so pass unnoticed. And often it did so pass, until one knock louder and more insistent than the rest would drag me in annoyance on to my feet once more. In a week, however, I got used to it, and then followed the strange incident which set in motion

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that chain of events of which to-morrow will see the end.

‘It happened that a couple of my neighbours were calling on me. One of them you have met—Admiral Palkin, a prolix old gentleman, with a habit of saying nothing at remarkable length. The other was a Mr. Stiles, a country gentleman who had a thought of putting up for that division of the county. I led these two gentlemen into the billiard-room, and composed myself to listen while the Admiral monologued. But the clock seemed to me to tick louder than ever, until, with one sharp and almost metallic thump, the sound ceased altogether.

‘At exactly the same moment, Admiral Palkin stopped dead in the middle of a sentence. It was nothing of any consequence that he was saying, but I remember the words at which he stopped. “I have often——” he said, and then he broke off, not with any abrupt start, or for any lack of words, but just as if he had completed all that he had meant to say. I looked at him across the fireplace, but his face wore its usual expression of complacent calm. He was in no way put out. Nor did it seem that any new train of thought had flashed into his mind and diverted it.

‘I turned my eyes from him to Mr. Stiles. Mr. Stiles seemed actually to be unaware that the Admiral had stopped talking at all. Admiral Palkin, you will remember, was a person of consequence in the district, and Mr. Stiles, who would subsequently need his vote and influence and motor-car, had thought fit to assume an air of great deference. From the beginning he had leaned towards the Admiral, his elbow upon his knee, his chin propped upon his hand, and his head now and again nodding a thoughtful assent to the Admiral’s nothings. In this attitude he still remained, not surprised, not even patiently waiting for the renewal of wisdom, but simply attentive.

‘Nor did I move, for I was amused. The two men looked just like a couple of wax figures in Madame Tussaud’s, fixed in a stiff attitude and condemned so to

remain until the building should take fire and the wax run. I sat watching them for minutes, and still neither moved nor spoke. I never saw in my life a couple of people so entirely ridiculous. I tried hard to keep my countenance—for to laugh at these great little men in my own house would not only be bad manners, but would certainly do for me in the neighbourhood—but I could not help it. I began to smile, and the smile became a laugh. Yet not a muscle on the faces of my visitors changed. Not a frown overshadowed the Admiral's complacency; not a glance diverted the admiring eyes of Mr. Stiles. And then the clock began to tick again, and, to my infinite astonishment, at the very same moment the Admiral continued.

'"—said to myself in my lighter moments—— And pray, sir, at what are you laughing?"

'Mr. Stiles turned with an angry glance towards me. Admiral Palkin had resumed his conversation, apparently unaware that there had been any interval at all. My laughter, on the other hand, had extended beyond the interval, had played an accompaniment to the words just spoken. I made my excuses as well as I could, but I recognised that they were deemed insufficient. The two gentlemen left my house with the coldest farewells you can imagine.

'The same extraordinary incident was repeated with other visitors, but I was on my guard against any injudicious merriment. Moreover, I had no longer any desire to laugh. I was too perplexed. My visitors never seemed to notice that there had been a lengthy interval, or indeed any interval at all, while I, for my part, hesitated to ask them what had so completely hypnotised them.

'The next development took place when I was alone in the room. It was five o'clock in the afternoon. I had been out shooting a covert close to the house, and a few minutes after I had rung the bell, I remembered that I had for-

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gotten some instructions which I had meant to give to the keeper. So I got up at once, thinking to catch him in the gun-room before he went home.

‘As I rose from my chair, the clock, which had been ticking loudly—though, as I have said, it was rather a hollow, booming sound, as though the pendulum struck the wood of the case, than a mere ticking of the clock-work—ceased its noise with the abruptness to which I was growing used. I went out of the room into the hall, and I saw Humphreys with the tea-tray in his hands in the hall. He was turned towards the billiard-room door, but to my astonishment he was not moving. He was poised with one foot in the air, as though he had been struck, as the saying is, with a step half taken. You have seen, no doubt, instantaneous photographs of people in the act of walking. Well, Humphreys was exactly like one of those photographs. He had just the same stiff, ungainly look. I should have spoken to him, but I was anxious to catch my keeper before he went away. So I took no notice of him. I crossed the hall quickly and went out by the front door, leaving it open. The gun-room was really a small building of corrugated iron, standing apart at the back of the house. I went to it and tried the door. It was locked.

‘I called aloud: “Martin! Martin!”

‘But I received no answer. I ran round the house again, thinking that he might just have started home, but I saw no signs of him. There were some outhouses which it was his business to look after, and I visited them, opening the door of each of them and calling him by name. Then I went down the drive to the gate, thinking that I might perhaps catch a glimpse of him upon the road, but again I was disappointed.

‘I then returned to the house, shut the front door, and there in the hall stood Humphreys in his ridiculous attitude with the tea-tray in his hands. I passed him and went back into the billiard-room. He took no notice of

me whatever. I looked at the clock upon the mantelshelf, and I saw that I had been away just fourteen minutes. For fourteen minutes Humphreys had been standing on one leg in the hall. It seemed as incredible as it was ludicrous. Yet there was the clock to bear me out. I sat down on my chair with my hands trembling, my mind in a maze. The strangest thought had come to me, and while I revolved it in my mind, the clock resumed its ticking, the door opened, and Humphreys appeared with the tea-tray in his hand.

“You have been a long time, Humphreys,” I said, and the man looked at me quickly. My voice was shaking with excitement, my face, no doubt, had a disordered look.

“I prepared the tea at once, sir,” he answered.

“It is twenty minutes by the clock since I rang the bell,” I said.

“Humphreys placed the tea on a small table at my side and then looked at the clock. An expression of surprise came over his face. He compared it with the dial of his own watch.

“The clock wants regulating, sir,” he said. “I set it by the kitchen clock this morning, and it has gained fourteen minutes.”

“I whipped my own watch out of my pocket and stared at it. Humphreys was quite right; the clock upon the mantelshelf had gained fourteen minutes upon all our watches. Yes, but it had gained those fourteen minutes in a second, and that was the least part of the marvel. I myself had had the benefit of those fourteen minutes.

“I had snatched them, as it were, from Time itself. I had looked at my watch when I rang the bell. It had marked five minutes to five. I had remained yet another four minutes in the room before I had remembered my forgotten instructions to the keeper. I had then gone out. I had visited the gun-room and the outhouses, I had walked to the front gate, I had returned. I had taken four-

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teen minutes over my search—I could not have taken less—and here were the hands of my watch now still pointing towards five, still short of the hour. Indeed, as I replaced my watch in my pocket, the clock in the hall outside struck five.

“As you passed through the hall, Humphreys, you saw no one, I suppose?” I said.

Humphreys raised his eyebrows with a look of perplexity. “No, sir, I saw no one,” he returned, “but it seemed to me that the front door banged. I think it must have been left open.”

“Very likely,” said I. “That will do,” and Humphreys went out of the room.

‘Imagine my feelings. Time is relative, it is a condition of our senses, it is nothing more—that we know. But its relation to me was different from its relation to others. The clock had given me fourteen minutes which it denied to all the world besides. Fourteen full minutes for me, yet they passed for others in less than the fraction of a second.

‘And not once only had it made me this gift, but many times. The Admiral’s pause, unnoticed by Mr. Stiles, was now explained to me. He had not paused; he had gone straight on with his flow of talk, and Mr. Stiles had gone straight on listening. But between two of Admiral Pal-kin’s words, Time had stood still for me. Similarly, Humphreys had not poised himself upon one ridiculous leg in the hall. He had taken a step in the usual way, but while his leg was raised, fourteen minutes were given to me. I had walked through the hall, I had walked back through the hall, yet Humphreys had not seen me. He could not have seen me, for there had been no interval of time for him to use his eyes. I had gone and come quicker than any flash, for even a flash is appreciable as some fraction of a second.

‘I ask you to imagine my feelings. Only with those which I first experienced would you, from your sane and

comfortable outlook upon life, have any sympathy, for at the beginning I was shocked. I had more than an inclination then to dash that clock upon the hearth and deny myself its bizarre and unnatural gift.

'Would that I had done so! But the inclination passed, and was succeeded by an incredible lightness of spirit. I had a gift which raised me above kings, which fanned into a flame every spark of vanity within me. I had so much more of time than any other man. I amused myself by making plans to use it, and thereupon I suffered a disappointment. For there was so little one could do in fourteen minutes, and the more I realised how little there was which I could do in my own private special stretch of time, the more I wanted to do, the more completely I wished to live in it, the more I wished to pluck power and advantage from it. Thus I began to look forward to the sudden cessation of the ticking of the clock; I began to wait for it, to live for it, and when it came, I could make no use of it. I gained fourteen minutes now and then, but I lost more and more of the hours which I shared with other men. They lost their salt for me. I became tortured with the waste of those minutes of my own. I had the power; what I wanted now was to employ it. The desire became an obsession occupying my thoughts, harassing my dreams.

'I was in this mood when I passed Brayton and yourself one evening in Pall Mall. I wrote to him that night, and I swear to you upon my conscience that I had no thought in writing but to put an end to an old disagreement, and re-establish, if possible, an old friendship. I wrote in a sudden revulsion of feeling. The waste of my days was brought home to me. I recognised that the great gift was no more than a perpetual injury. I proposed to gather my acquaintances about me, discard my ambition for some striking illustration of my power, and take up once more the threads of customary life. Yet my deter-

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mination lasted no longer than the time it took me to write the letter and run out with it to the post. I regretted its despatch even as I heard it fall to the bottom of the pillar-box.

‘Of my quarrel with Brayton I need not write at length. It sprang from a rancorous jealousy.

‘We had been friends and class-mates in the beginning. But as step by step he rose just a little above me, the friendship I had turned to gall and anger. I was never more than the second, he always the first. Had I been fourth or fifth, I think I should not have minded; but there was so little to separate us in merit or advancement. Yet there was always that little, and I dreaded the moment when he should take a bound and leave me far behind. The jealousy grew to a real hatred, made still more bitter to me by the knowledge that Brayton himself was unaware of it, and need not have been troubled had he been aware.

‘After I left the Army and lost sight of him, the flame burnt low. I believed it was extinguished when I invited him to stay with me; but he had not been an hour in the house when it blazed up within me. His success, the confidence which it had given him, his easy friendliness with strangers, the talk of him as a coming man, bit into my soul. The very sound of his footstep sickened me.

‘I was in this mood when the clock began to boom louder and louder in the billiard-room. Chalmers and Linfield were talking. I did not listen to them. My heart beat louder and louder within my breast, keeping pace with the clock. I knew that in a moment or two the sound would cease, and the doors of my private kingdom would be open for me to pass through.

‘I sat back in my chair waiting while the devilish inspiration had birth and grew strong. Here was the great chance to use the power I had—the only chance which had ever come to me. Brayton was writing letters in his room. The room was in a wing of the house. The sound

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of a shot would not be heard. There would be an end of his success; there would be for me such a triumphant use of my great advantage as I had never dreamed of.

'The clock suddenly ceased. I slipped from the room and went upstairs. I was quite leisurely. I had time. I was back in my chair again before seven minutes had passed.

'ARCHIE CRANFIELD.'

BY
W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM



R E D

THE skipper thrust his hand into one of his trouser pockets and with difficulty—for they were not at the sides but in front, and he was a portly man—pulled out a large silver watch. He looked at it and then looked again at the declining sun.

The Kanaka at the wheel gave him a glance, but did not speak. The skipper's eyes rested on the island they were approaching. A white line of foam marked the reef. He knew there was an opening large enough to get his ship through, and when they came a little nearer he counted on seeing it.

They had nearly an hour of daylight still before them. In the lagoon the water was deep and they could anchor comfortably. The chief of the village which he could already see among the coconut trees was a friend of the mate's and it would be pleasant to go ashore for the night.

The mate came forward at that minute, and the skipper turned to him.

'We'll take a bottle of booze along with us and get some girls in to dance,' he said.

'I don't see the opening,' said the mate.

He was a Kanaka, a handsome, swarthy fellow, with somewhat the look of a later Roman emperor, inclined to stoutness; but his face was fine and clean-cut.

'I'm dead sure there's one right here,' said the captain, looking through his glasses. 'I can't understand why I can't pick it up. Send one of the boys up the mast to have a look.'

The mate called one of the crew and gave him the order. The captain watched the Kanaka climb and waited for him to speak. But the Kanaka shouted down that he could see nothing but the unbroken line of foam. The captain spoke Samoan like a native, and he cursed him freely.

'Shall he stay up there?' asked the mate.

'What the hell good does that do?' answered the captain. 'The blame fool can't see worth a cent. You bet your sweet life I'd find the opening if I was up there.'

He looked at the slender mast with anger. It was all very well for a native who had been used to climbing up coconut trees all his life. He was fat and heavy.

'Come down,' he shouted. 'You're no more use than a dead dog. We'll just have to go along the reef till we find the opening.'

It was a seventy-ton schooner with paraffin auxiliary, and it ran, when there was no head-wind, between four and five knots. It was a bedraggled object: it had been painted white a very long time ago, but it was now dirty, dingy and mottled. It smelt strongly of paraffin and of the copra which was its usual cargo.

They were within a hundred feet of the reef now, and the captain told the steersman to run along it till they came to the opening. But when they had gone a couple of miles he realised that they had missed it. He went about and slowly worked back again. The white foam of the reef continued without interruption, and now the sun was setting. With a curse at the stupidity of the crew the skipper resigned himself to waiting till next morning.

'Put her about,' he said. 'I can't anchor here.'

They went out to sea a little and presently it was quite

dark. They anchored. When the sail was furled the ship began to roll a good deal. They said in Apia that one day she would roll right over; and the owner, a German-American who managed one of the largest stores, said that no money was big enough to induce him to go out in her.

The cook, a Chinese in white trousers, very dirty and ragged, and a thin white tunic, came to say that supper was ready, and when the skipper went into the cabin he found the engineer already seated at table. The engineer was a long, lean man with a scraggy neck. He was dressed in blue overalls and a sleeveless jersey which showed his thin arms tattooed from elbow to wrist.

'Hell, having to spend the night outside,' said the skipper.

The engineer did not answer, and they ate their supper in silence.

The cabin was lit by a dim oil-lamp. When they had eaten the canned apricots with which the meal finished, the Chink brought them a cup of tea. The skipper lit a cigar and went on the upper deck. The island now was only a darker mass against the night. The stars were very bright. The only sound was the ceaseless breaking of the surf.

The skipper sank into a deck-chair and smoked idly. Presently three or four members of the crew came up and sat down. One of them had a banjo and another a concertina. They began to play, and one of them sang. The native song sounded strange on these instruments.

Then, to the singing, a couple began to dance. It was a barbaric dance, savage and primaeval, rapid, with quick movements of the hands and feet and contortions of the body; it was sensual, sexual even, but sexual without passion. It was very animal, direct, weird without mystery; natural, in short, and one might almost say childlike.

At last they grew tired. They stretched themselves on the deck and slept, and all was silent. The skipper lifted

himself heavily out of his chair and clambered down the companion. He went into his cabin and got out of his clothes. He climbed into his bunk and lay there. He panted a little in the heat of the night.

But next morning, when the dawn crept over the tranquil sea, the opening in the reef which had eluded them the night before was seen a little to the east of where they lay. The schooner entered the lagoon. There was not a ripple on the surface of the water. Deep down among the coral rocks you saw little coloured fish swim.

When he had anchored his ship the skipper ate his breakfast and went on deck. The sun shone from an unclouded sky, but in the early morning the air was grateful and cool. It was Sunday, and there was a feeling of quietness, a silence as though Nature were at rest, which gave him a peculiar sense of comfort. He sat, looking at the wooded coast, and felt lazy and well at ease.

Presently a slow smile moved his lips and he threw the stump of his cigar into the water.

‘I guess I’ll go ashore,’ he said. ‘Get the boat out.’

He climbed stiffly down the ladder and was rowed to a little cove. The coconut trees came down to the water’s edge, not in rows, but spaced out with an ordered formality. They were like a ballet of spinsters, elderly but flip-pant, standing in affected attitudes with the simpering graces of a bygone age.

He sauntered idly through them, along a path that could be just seen winding its tortuous way, and it led him presently to a broad creek. There was a bridge across it, but a bridge constructed of single trunks of coconut trees, a dozen of them, placed end to end and supported where they met by a forked branch driven into the bed of the creek. You walked on a smooth, round surface, narrow and slippery, and there was no support for the hand. To cross such a bridge required sure feet and a stout heart.

The skipper hesitated. But he saw on the other side,

nestling among the trees, a white man's house; he made up his mind and, rather gingerly, began to walk.

He watched his feet carefully, and where one trunk joined on to the next and there was a difference of level, he tottered a little. It was with a gasp of relief that he reached the last tree and finally set his feet on the firm ground of the other side. He had been so intent on the difficult crossing that he never noticed anyone was watching him, and it was with surprise that he heard himself spoken to.

'It takes a bit of nerve to cross these bridges when you're not used to them.'

He looked up and saw a man standing in front of him. He had evidently come out of the house which the captain had seen.

'I saw you hesitate,' the man continued, with a smile on his lips, 'and I was watching to see you fall in.'

'Not on your life,' said the captain, who had now recovered confidence.

'I've fallen in myself before now. I remember one evening I came back from shooting, and I fell in, gun and all. Now I get a boy to carry my gun for me.'

He was a man no longer young, with a small beard, now somewhat grey, and a thin face. He was dressed in a singlet without arms, and a pair of duck trousers. He wore neither shoes nor socks. He spoke English with a slight accent.

'Are you Neilson?' asked the skipper.

'I am.'

'I've heard about you. I thought you lived somewhere round here.'

The skipper followed his host into the little bungalow and sat down heavily in the chair which the other motioned him to take. While Neilson went out to fetch whisky and glasses he took a look round the room.

It filled him with amazement. He had never seen so

many books. The shelves reached from floor to ceiling on all four walls, and they were closely packed. There was a grand piano littered with music, and a large table on which books and magazines lay in disorder.

The room made him feel embarrassed. He remembered that Neilson was a queer fellow. No one knew very much about him, although he had been in the islands for so many years, but those who knew him agreed that he was queer.

'You've got one big heap of books here,' he said, when Neilson returned.

'They do no harm,' answered Neilson with a smile.

'Have you read them all?' asked the skipper.

'Most of them.'

'I'm a bit of a reader myself. I have the *Saturday Evening Post* sent me reglar.'

Neilson poured his visitor a good stiff glass of whisky and gave him a cigar. The skipper volunteered a little information.

'I got in last night, but I couldn't find the opening, so I had to anchor outside. I never been this run before, but my people had some stuff they wanted to bring over here. Gray, d'you know him?'

'Yes, he's got a store a little way along.'

'Well, there was a lot of canned stuff that he wanted over, an' he's got some copra. They thought I might just as well come over as lie idle at Apia. I run between Apia and Pago-Pago mostly; but they've got smallpox there just now, and there's nothing stirring.'

He took a drink of his whisky and lit a cigar. He was a taciturn man, but there was something in Neilson that made him nervous, and his nervousness made him talk. The Swede was looking at him with large dark eyes in which there was an expression of faint amusement.

'This is a tidy little place you've got here.'

'I've done my best with it.'

'You must do pretty well with your trees. They look fine. With copra at the price it is now. I had a bit of a plantation myself once; in Upolu it was, but I had to sell it.'

He looked round the room again, where all those books gave him a feeling of something incomprehensible and hostile.

'I guess you must find it a bit lonesome here, though,' he said.

'I've got used to it. I've been here for twenty-five years.'

Now the captain could think of nothing more to say, and he smoked in silence. Neilson had apparently no wish to break it. He looked at his guest with a meditative eye. He was a tall man, more than six feet high, and very stout. His face was red and blotchy, with a network of little purple veins on the cheeks, and his features were sunk into its fatness. His eyes were bloodshot. His neck was buried in rolls of fat. But for a fringe of long curly hair, nearly white, at the back of his head, he was quite bald; and that immense, shiny surface of forehead, which might have given him a false look of intelligence, on the contrary gave him one of peculiar imbecility. He wore a blue flannel shirt, open at the neck and showing his fat chest covered with a mat of reddish hair, and a very old pair of blue serge trousers.

He sat in his chair in a heavy, ungainly attitude, his great belly thrust forward and his fat legs uncrossed. All elasticity had gone from his limbs. Neilson wondered idly what sort of man he had been in his youth. It was almost impossible to imagine that this creature of vast bulk had ever been a boy who ran about.

The skipper finished his whisky, and Neilson pushed the bottle towards him.

'Help yourself.'

The skipper leaned forward and with his great hand seized it.

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'And how come you in these parts yourself?' he said.

'Oh, I came out to the islands for my health. My lungs were bad and they said I hadn't a year to live. You see they were wrong.'

'I mean, how come you to settle down right here?'

'I am a sentimentalist.'

'Oh!'

Neilson knew that the skipper had not an idea what he meant, and he looked at him with an ironical twinkle in his dark eyes. Perhaps just because the skipper was so gross and dull a man, the whim seized him to talk further.

'You were too busy keeping your balance to notice, when you crossed the bridge, but this spot is generally considered rather pretty.'

'It's a cute little house you've got here.'

'Ah, that wasn't here when I first came. There was a native hut, with its beehive roof and its pillars, overshadowed by a great tree with red flowers; and the croton bushes, their leaves yellow and red and golden, made a pied fence around it. And then all about were the coconut trees, as fanciful as women, and as vain. They stood at the water's edge and spent all day looking at their reflections.

'I was a young man then—good heavens! it's a quarter of a century ago—and I wanted to enjoy all the loveliness of the world in the short time allotted to me before I passed into the darkness. I thought it was the most beautiful spot I had ever seen. The first time I saw it I had a catch at my heart, and I was afraid I was going to cry. I wasn't more than twenty-five, and though I put the best face I could on it, I didn't want to die. And somehow it seemed to me that the very beauty of this place made it easier for me to accept my fate. I felt when I came here that all my past life had fallen away, Stockholm and its University, and then Bonn: it all seemed the life of somebody else, as though now at last I had achieved the reality which our doctors of philosophy—I am one myself, you

know—had discussed so much. “A year,” I cried to myself. “I have a year. I will spend it here, and then I am content to die.”

‘We are foolish and sentimental and melodramatic at twenty-five; but if we weren’t, perhaps we should be less wise at fifty.’

‘Now drink, my friend. Don’t let the nonsense I talk interfere with you.’

He waved his thin hand towards the bottle, and the skipper finished what remained in his glass.

‘You ain’t drinking nothin’,’ he said, reaching for the whisky.

‘I am of sober habit,’ smiled the Swede. ‘I intoxicate myself in ways which I fancy are more subtle. But perhaps that is only vanity. Anyhow, the effects are more lasting and the results less deleterious.’

‘They say there’s a deal of cocaine taken in the States now,’ said the captain.

Neilson chuckled.

‘But I do not see a white man often,’ he continued, ‘and for once I don’t think a drop of whisky can do me any harm.’

He poured himself out a little, added some soda, and took a sip.

‘And presently I found out why the spot had such an unearthly loveliness. Here love had tarried for a moment, like a migrant bird that happens on a ship in mid-ocean and for a little while folds its tired wings. The fragrance of a beautiful passion hovered over it like the fragrance of hawthorn in May in the meadows of my home. It seems to me that the places where men have loved or suffered keep about them always some faint aroma of something that has not wholly died. It is as though they had acquired a spiritual significance which mysteriously affects those who pass. I wish I could make myself clear.’ He smiled a little. ‘Though I cannot imagine that if I did you would understand.’

He paused.

'I think this place was beautiful because here I had been loved beautifully.' And now he shrugged his shoulders. 'But perhaps it is only that my æsthetic sense is gratified by the happy conjunction of young love and a suitable setting.'

Even a man less thick-witted than the skipper might have been forgiven if he were bewildered by Neilson's words. For he seemed faintly to laugh at what he said. It was as though he spoke from emotion which his intellect found ridiculous. He said himself that he was a sentimentalist, and when sentimentality is joined with scepticism there is often the devil to pay. He was silent for an instant, and looked at the captain with eyes in which there was a sudden perplexity.

'You know, I can't help thinking that I've seen you before somewhere or other,' he said.

'I couldn't say as I remember you,' returned the skipper.

'I have a curious feeling as though your face were familiar to me. It's been puzzling me for some time. But I can't situate my recollection in any place or at any time.'

The skipper massively shrugged his heavy shoulders.

'It's thirty years since I first come to the islands. A man can't figure on remembering all the folk he meets in a while like that.'

The Swede shook his head.

'You know how one sometimes has the feeling that a place one has never been to before is strangely familiar. That's how I seem to see you.' He gave a whimsical smile. 'Perhaps, perhaps you were the master of a galley in Ancient Rome and I was a slave at the oar. Thirty years have you been here?'

'Every bit of thirty years.'

'I wonder if you knew a man called Red?'

'Red?'

'That is the only name I've ever known him by. I never knew him personally. I never even set eyes on him. And yet I seem to see him more clearly than many men, my brothers, for instance, with whom I passed my daily life for many years. He lives in my imagination with the distinctness of a Paolo Malatesta or a Romeo. But I dare say you have never read Dante or Shakespeare?'

'I can't say as I have,' said the captain.

Neilson, smoking a cigar, leaned back in his chair and looked vacantly at the ring of smoke which floated in the still air. A smile played on his lips, but his eyes were grave.

Then he looked at the captain. There was in his gross obesity something extraordinarily repellent. He had the plethoric self-satisfaction of the very fat. It was an outrage. It set Neilson's nerves on edge. But the contrast between the man before him and the man he had in mind was pleasant.

'It appears that Red was the most comely thing you ever saw. I've talked to quite a number of people who knew him in those days, white men, and they all agree that the first time you saw him his beauty just took your breath away. They called him Red on account of his flaming hair. It had a natural wave and he wore it long. It must have been of that wonderful colour that the pre-Raphaelites raved over. I don't think he was vain of it, he was much too ingenuous for that; but no one could have blamed him if he had been.

'He was tall, six feet and an inch or two—in the native house that used to stand here was the mark of his height cut with a knife on the central trunk that supported the roof—and he was made like a Greek god, broad in the shoulders and thin in the flanks; he was like Apollo, with just that soft roundness which Praxiteles gave him, and that suave, feminine grace which has in it something troubling and mysterious. His skin was dazzling white, milky, like satin; his skin was like a woman's.'

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'I had a kind of a white skin myself when I was a kiddie,' said the skipper, with a twinkle in his bloodshot eyes.

But Neilson paid no attention to him. He was telling his story now, and interruption made him impatient.

'And his face was just as beautiful as his body. He had large blue eyes, very dark, so that some say they were black, and unlike most red-haired people he had dark eyebrows and long dark lashes. His features were perfectly regular and his mouth was like a scarlet wound. He was twenty.'

On these words the Swede stopped with a certain sense of the dramatic. He took a sip of whisky.

'He was unique. There never was anyone more beautiful. There was no more reason for him than for a wonderful blossom to flower on a wild plant. He was a happy accident of Nature.

'One day he landed at that cove into which you must have put this morning. He was an American sailor, and he had deserted from a man-of-war in Apia. He had induced some good-humoured native to give him a passage on a cutter that happened to be sailing from Apia to Safoto, and he had been put ashore here in a dug-out.

'I do not know why he deserted. Perhaps life on a man-of-war, with its restrictions, irked him; perhaps he was in trouble; and perhaps it was the South Seas and these romantic islands that got into his bones. Every now and then they take a man strangely, and he finds himself like a fly in a spider's web. It may be that there was a softness of fibre in him, and these green hills with their soft airs, this blue sea, took the Northern strength from him as Delilah took the Nazarite's. Anyhow, he wanted to hide himself, and he thought he would be safe in this secluded nook till his ship had sailed from Samoa.

'There was a native hut at the cove, and as he stood there, wondering where exactly he should turn his steps, a young girl came out and invited him to enter. He knew

scarcely two words of the native tongue, and she as little English. But he understood well enough what her smiles meant, and her pretty gestures, and he followed her. He sat down on a mat and she gave him slices of pineapple to eat.

‘I can speak of Red only from hearsay, but I saw the girl three years after he first met her, and she was scarcely nineteen then. You cannot imagine how exquisite she was. She had the passionate grace of the hibiscus and the rich colour. She was rather tall, slim, with the delicate features of her race, and large eyes like pools of still water under the palm trees; her hair, black and curling, fell down her back, and she wore a wreath of scented flowers. Her hands were lovely. They were so small, so exquisitely formed, they gave your heart-strings a wrench.

‘And in those days she laughed easily. Her smile was so delightful that it made your knees shake. Her skin was like a field of ripe corn on a summer day. Good heavens! How can I describe her? She was too beautiful to be real.

‘And these two young things, she was sixteen and he was twenty, fell in love with one another at first sight. That is the real love, not the love that comes from sympathy, common interests or intellectual community, but love pure and simple. That is the love that Adam felt for Eve when he awoke and found her in the Garden gazing at him with dewy eyes. That is the love that draws the beasts to one another, and the gods. That is the love that makes the world a miracle. That is the love which gives life its pregnant meaning. You have never heard of the wise, cynical French duke who said that with two lovers there is always one who loves and one who lets himself be loved; it is a bitter truth to which most of us have to resign ourselves. But now and then there are two who love and two who let themselves be loved. Then one might fancy that the sun stands still, as it stood when Joshua prayed to the God of Israel.

‘And even now after all these years, when I think of these two, so young, so fair, so simple, and of their love, I feel a pang. It tears my heart, just as my heart is torn when on certain nights I watch the full moon shining on the lagoon from an unclouded sky. There is always pain in the contemplation of perfect beauty.

‘They were children. She was good and sweet and kind. I know nothing of him, and I like to think that then, at all events, he was ingenuous and frank. I like to think that his soul was as comely as his body. But I daresay he had no more soul than the creatures of the woods and forests who made pipes from reeds and bathed in the mountain streams when the world was young, and you might catch sight of little fauns galloping through the glade on the back of a bearded centaur. A soul is a troublesome possession, and when man developed it he lost the Garden of Eden.

‘Well, when Red came to the island it had recently been visited by one of those epidemics which the white man has brought to the South Seas, and one-third of the inhabitants had died. It seems that the girl had lost all her near kin and she lived now in the house of distant cousins. The household consisted of two ancient crones, bowed and wrinkled, two younger women, and a man and a boy.

‘For a few days he stayed there. But perhaps he felt himself too near the shore, with the possibility that he might fall in with white men who would reveal his hiding-place; perhaps the lovers could not bear that the company of others should rob them for an instant of the delight of being together. One morning they set out, the pair of them, with the few things that belonged to the girl, and walked along a grassy path under the coconuts, till they came to the creek you see, They had to cross the bridge you crossed, and the girl laughed gleefully because he was afraid. She held his hand till they came to the end of the first tree, and then his courage failed him and he had to go back. He was obliged to take off all his clothes before

he could risk it, and she carried them over for him on her head.

‘They settled down in the empty hut that stood here. Whether she had any rights over it (land tenure is a complicated business in the islands), or whether the owner had died during the epidemic, I do not know; but anyhow, no one questioned them, and they took possession. Their furniture consisted of a couple of grass-mats on which they slept, a fragment of looking-glass, and a bowl or two. In this pleasant land that is enough to start house-keeping on.

‘They say that happy people have no history, and certainly a happy love has none. They did nothing all day long, and yet the days seemed all too short.

‘The girl had a native name, but Red called her Sally. He picked up the easy language very quickly, and he used to lie on the mat for hours while she chattered gaily to him. He was a silent fellow, and perhaps his mind was lethargic. He smoked incessantly the cigarettes which she made him out of the native tobacco and pandanus leaf, and he watched her while with deft fingers she made grass-mats.

‘Often natives would come in and tell long stories of the old days when the island was disturbed by tribal wars. Sometimes he would go fishing on the reef, and bring home a basket full of coloured fish. Sometimes at night he would go out with a lantern to catch lobster. There were plantains round the hut, and Sally would roast them for their frugal meal. She knew how to make delicious messes from coconuts, and the bread-fruit tree by the side of the creek gave them its fruit. On feast-days they killed a little pig and cooked it on hot stones. They bathed together in the creek; and in the evening they went down to the lagoon and paddled about in a dug-out, with its great outrigger.

‘The sea was deep blue, wine-coloured at sundown, like

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the sea of Homeric Greece; but in the lagoon the colour had an infinite variety, aquamarine and amethyst and emerald, and the setting sun turned it for a short moment to liquid gold. Then there was the colour of the coral, brown, white, pink, red, purple; and the shapes it took were marvellous. It was like a magic garden, and the hurrying fish were like butterflies. It strangely lacked reality. Among the coral were pools with a floor of white sand, and here, where the water was dazzling clear, it was very good to bathe.

“Then, cool and happy, they wandered back in the gloaming over the soft grass road to the creek, walking hand in hand, and now the mynah birds filled the coconut trees with their clamour. And then the night, with that great sky shining with gold, that seemed to stretch more widely than the skies of Europe, and the soft airs that blew gently through the open hut, the long night again was all too short.

‘She was sixteen and he was barely twenty. The dawn crept in among the wooden pillars of the hut and looked at those lovely children sleeping in one another’s arms. The sun hid behind the great tattered leaves of the plantains so that it might not disturb them, and then, with playing malice, shot a golden ray, like the outstretched paw of a Persian cat, on their faces. They opened their sleepy eyes and they smiled to welcome another day.

‘The weeks lengthened into months, and a year passed. They seemed to love one another as—I hesitate to say passionately, for passion has in it always a shade of sadness, a touch of bitterness or anguish, but as wholeheartedly, as simply and naturally, as on that first day on which, meeting, they had recognised that a god was in them.

‘If you had asked them, I have no doubt that they would have thought it impossible to suppose their love could ever cease. Do we not know that the essential element of love

is a belief in its own eternity? And yet perhaps in Red there was already a very little seed, unknown to himself and unsuspected by the girl, which would in time have grown to weariness. For one day one of the natives from the cove told them that some way down the coast at the anchorage was a British whaling-ship.

“Gee!” he said. “I wonder if I could make a trade of some nuts and plantains for a pound or two of tobacco?”

The pandanus cigarettes that Sally made him with untiring hands were strong and pleasant enough to smoke, but they left him unsatisfied; and he yearned on a sudden for real tobacco, hard, rank and pungent. He had not smoked a pipe for many months. His mouth watered at the thought of it.

‘One would have thought some premonition of harm would have made Sally seek to dissuade him; but love possessed her so completely that it never occurred to her any power on earth could take him from her. They went up into the hills together and gathered a great basket of wild oranges, green, but sweet and juicy; and they picked plantains from around the hut, and coconuts from their trees, and bread-fruit and mangoes, and they carried them down to the cove. They loaded the unstable canoe with them, and Red and the native boy who had brought them the news of the ship paddled along outside the reef.

‘It was the last time she ever saw him.

‘Next day the boy came back alone. He was all in tears. This is the story he told. When, after their long paddle, they reached the ship and Red hailed it, a white man looked over the side and told them to come on board. They took the fruit they had brought with them and Red piled it up on the deck. The white man and he began to talk, and they seemed to come to some agreement. One of them went below and brought up tobacco. Red took some at once and lit a pipe. The boy imitated the zest with which he blew a great cloud of smoke from his mouth.

Then they said something to him and he went into the cabin.

‘Through the open door the boy, watching curiously, saw a bottle brought out, and glasses. Red drank and smoked. They seemed to ask him something, for he shook his head and laughed. The man, the first man who had spoken to them, laughed too, and he filled Red’s glass once more. They went on talking and drinking, and presently, growing tired of watching a sight that meant nothing to him, the boy curled himself up on the deck and slept.

‘He was awakened by a kick; and, jumping to his feet, he saw that the ship was slowly sailing out of the lagoon. He caught sight of Red seated at the table, with his head resting heavily on his arms, fast asleep. He made a movement towards him, intending to wake him, but a rough hand seized his arm, and a man, with a scowl and words which he did not understand, pointed to the side. He shouted to Red, but in a moment he was seized and flung overboard. Helpless, he swam round to his canoe, which was drifting a little way off, and pushed it on to the reef. He climbed in and, sobbing all the way, paddled back to shore.

‘What had happened was obvious enough. The whaler, by desertion or sickness, was short of hands, and the captain, when Red came aboard, had asked him to sign on; on his refusal, he had made him drunk and kidnapped him.

‘Sally was beside herself with grief. For three days she screamed and cried. The natives did what they could to comfort her, but she would not be comforted. She would not eat. And then, exhausted, she sank into a sullen apathy.

‘She spent long days at the cove, watching the lagoon, in the vain hope that Red somehow or other would manage to escape. She sat on the white sand, hour after hour,

with the tears running down her cheeks, and at night dragged herself wearily back across the creek to the little hut where she had been happy. The people with whom she had lived before Red came to the island wished her to return to them, but she would not; she was convinced that Red would come back, and she wanted him to find her where he had left her. Four months later she was delivered of a still-born child, and the old woman who had come to help her through her confinement remained with her in the hut.

'All joy was taken from her life. If her anguish with time became less intolerable, it was replaced by a settled melancholy. You would not have thought that among these people, whose emotions, though so violent, are very transient, a woman could be found capable of so enduring a passion. She never lost the profound conviction that sooner or later Red would come back. She watched for him, and every time someone crossed this slender little bridge of coconut trees she looked. It might at last be he.'

Neilson stopped talking and gave a faint sigh.

'And what happened to her in the end?' asked the skipper.

Neilson smiled bitterly.

'Oh, three years afterwards she took up with another white man.'

The skipper gave a fat, cynical chuckle.

'That's generally what happens to them,' he said.

The Swede shot him a look of hatred. He did not know why that gross, obese man excited in him so violent a repulsion. But his thoughts wandered, and he found his mind filled with memories of the past.

He went back five-and-twenty years. It was when he first came to the island, weary of Apia, with its heavy drinking, its gambling and coarse sensuality, a sick man, trying to resign himself to the loss of the career which had fired his imagination with ambitious thoughts. He set

behind him resolutely all his hopes of making a great name for himself, and strove to content himself with the few poor months of careful life which was all that he could count on.

He was boarding with a half-caste trader who had a store a couple of miles along the coast at the edge of a native village; and one day, wandering aimlessly along the grassy paths of the coconut groves, he had come upon the hut in which Sally lived. The beauty of the spot had filled him with a rapture so great that it was almost painful, and then he had seen Sally.

She was the loveliest creature he had ever seen, and the sadness in those dark, magnificent eyes of hers affected him strangely. The Kanakas were a handsome race, and beauty was not rare among them; but it was the beauty of shapely animals. It was empty. But those tragic eyes were dark with mystery, and you felt in them the bitter complexity of the groping, human soul. The trader told him the story and it moved him.

‘Do you think he’ll ever come back?’ asked Neilson.

‘No fear. Why, it’ll be a couple of years before the ship is paid off, and by then he’ll have forgotten all about her. I bet he was pretty mad when he woke up and found he’d been shanghaied, and I shouldn’t wonder but he wanted to fight somebody. But he’d got to grin and bear it, and I guess in a month he was thinking it the best thing that had ever happened to him that he got away from the island.’

But Neilson could not get the story out of his head. Perhaps because he was sick and weakly, the radiant health of Red appealed to his imagination. Himself an ugly man, insignificant of appearance, he prized very highly comeliness in others.

He had never been passionately in love, and certainly he had never been passionately loved. The mutual attraction of those two young things gave him a singular delight. It had the ineffable beauty of the Absolute.

He went again to the little hut by the creek. He had a gift for languages and an energetic mind, accustomed to work, and he had already given much time to the study of the local tongue. Old habit was strong in him, and he was gathering together material for a paper on the Samoan speech.

The old crone who shared the hut with Sally invited him to come in and sit down. She gave him kava to drink and cigarettes to smoke. She was glad to have someone to chat with, and while she talked he looked at Sally. She reminded him of the Psyche in the museum at Naples. Her features had the same clear purity of line, and though she had borne a child she had still a virginal aspect.

It was not till he had seen her two or three times that he induced her to speak. Then it was only to ask him if he had seen in Apia a man called Red. Two years had passed since his disappearance, but it was plain that she still thought of him incessantly.

It did not take Neilson long to discover that he was in love with her. It was only by an effort of will now that he prevented himself from going every day to the creek, and when he was not with Sally his thoughts were.

At first, looking upon himself as a dying man, he asked only to look at her, and occasionally hear her speak, and his love gave him a wonderful happiness. He exulted in its purity. He wanted nothing from her but the opportunity to weave around her graceful person a web of beautiful fancies.

But the open air, the equable temperature, the rest, the simple fare, began to have an unexpected effect on his health. His temperature did not soar at night to such alarming heights, he coughed less and began to put on weight; six months passed without his having a hæmorrhage; and on a sudden he saw the possibility that he might live. He had studied his disease carefully, and the hope dawned upon him that with great care he might arrest its course.

It exhilarated him to look forward once more to the future. He made plans. It was evident that any active life was out of the question; but he could live on the islands, and the small income he had, insufficient elsewhere, would be ample to keep him. He would grow coconuts; that would give him an occupation; and he would send for his books and a piano; but his quick mind saw that in all this he was merely trying to conceal from himself the desire which obsessed him.

He wanted Sally. He loved not only her beauty, but that dim soul which he divined behind her suffering eyes. He would intoxicate her with his passion. In the end he would make her forget. And in an ecstasy of surrender he fancied himself giving her, too, the happiness which he had thought never to know again, but had now so miraculously achieved.

He asked her to live with him. She refused. He had expected that, and did not let it depress him, for he was sure that sooner or later she would yield. His love was irresistible.

He told the old woman of his wishes, and found, somewhat to his surprise, that she and the neighbours, long aware of them, were strongly urging Sally to accept his offer. After all, every native was glad to keep house for a white man, and Neilson, according to the standards of the island, was a rich one.

The trader with whom he boarded went to her and told her not to be a fool; such an opportunity would not come again, and after so long she could not still believe that Red would ever return.

The girl's resistance only increased Neilson's desire, and what had been a very pure love now became an agonising passion. He was determined that nothing should stand in his way. He gave Sally no peace. At last, worn out by his persistence and the persuasions, by turns pleading and angry, of everyone around her, she consented.

But the day after, when, exultant, he went to see her, he found that in the night she had burnt down the hut in which she and Red had lived together. The old crone ran towards him full of angry abuse of Sally, but he waved her aside; it did not matter, they would build a bungalow on the place where the hut had stood. A European house would really be more convenient if he wanted to bring out a piano and a vast number of books.

And so the little wooden house was built in which he had now lived for many years, and Sally became his wife.

But after the first few weeks of rapture, during which he was satisfied with what she gave him, he had known little happiness. She had yielded to him, through weariness, but she had only yielded what she set no store on. The soul which he had dimly glimpsed escaped him. He knew that she cared nothing for him. She still loved Red, and all the time she was waiting for his return. At a sign from him, Neilson knew that, notwithstanding his love, his tenderness, his sympathy, his generosity, she would leave him without a moment's hesitation. She would never give a thought to his distress.

Anguish seized him, and he battered at that impenetrable self of hers which sullenly resisted him. His love became bitter. He tried to melt her heart with kindness, but it remained as hard as before; he feigned indifference, but she did not notice it. Sometimes he lost his temper and abused her, and then she wept silently.

Sometimes he thought she was nothing but a fraud, and that soul simply an invention of his own, and that he could not get into the sanctuary of her heart because there was no sanctuary there. His love became a prison from which he longed to escape, but he had not the strength merely to open the door—that was all it needed—and walk out into the open air. It was torture, and at last he became numb and hopeless.

In the end the fire burnt itself out, and when he saw her

eyes rest for an instant on the slender bridge, it was no longer rage that filled his heart, but impatience. For many years now they had lived together, bound by the ties of habit and convenience, and it was with a smile that he looked back on his old passion. She was an old woman, for the women on the islands age quickly, and if he had no love for her any more he had tolerance. She left him alone. He was contented with his piano and his books.

His thoughts led him to a desire for words.

‘When I look back now and reflect on that brief passionate love of Red and Sally, I think that perhaps they should thank the ruthless fate that separated them when their love seemed still to be at its height. They suffered, but they suffered in beauty. They were spared the real tragedy of love.’

‘I don’t know exactly as I get you,’ said the skipper.

‘The tragedy of live is not death or separation. How long do you think it would have been before one or other of them ceased to care? Oh, it is dreadfully bitter to look at a woman whom you have loved with all your heart and soul, so that you felt you could not bear to let her out of your sight, and realise that you would not mind if you never saw her again. The tragedy of love is indifference.’

But while he was speaking a very extraordinary thing happened. Though he had been addressing the skipper he had not been talking to him; he had been putting his thoughts into words for himself, and with his eyes fixed on the man in front of him he had not seen him. But now an image presented itself to them, an image not of the man he saw, but of another man. It was as though he were looking into one of those distorting mirrors that make you extraordinarily squat or outrageously elongate; but here exactly the opposite took place, and in the obese, ugly old man he caught the shadowy glimpse of a stripling.

He gave him now a quick, searching scrutiny. Why had a haphazard stroll brought him just to this place?

A sudden tremor of his heart made him slightly breathless. An absurd suspicion seized him. What had happened to him was impossible, and yet it might be a fact.

'What is your name?' he asked abruptly.

The skipper's face puckered and he gave a cunning chuckle. He looked then malicious and horribly vulgar.

'It's such a damned long time since I heard it that I almost forget it myself; but for thirty years now in the islands they've always called me Red.'

His huge form shook as he gave a low, almost silent laugh. It was obscene. Neilson shuddered. Red was hugely amused, and from his bloodshot eyes tears ran down his cheeks.

Neilson gave a gasp, for at that moment a woman came in. She was a native, a woman of somewhat commanding presence, stout without being corpulent, dark, for the natives grow darker with age, with very grey hair. She wore a black Mother Hubbard, and its thinness showed her heavy breasts. The moment had come.

She made an observation to Neilson about some household matter and he answered. He wondered if his voice sounded as unnatural to her as it did to himself. She gave the man who was sitting in the chair by the window an indifferent glance, and went out of the room. The moment had come and gone.

Neilson for a moment could not speak. He was strangely shaken. Then he said:

'I'd be very glad if you'd stay and have a bit of dinner with me. Pot luck.'

'I don't think I will,' said Red. 'I must go after this fellow Gray. I'll give him his stuff and then I'll get away. I want to be back in Apia to-morrow.'

'I'll send a boy along with you to show you the way.'

'That'll be fine.'

Red heaved himself out of his chair, while the Swede called one of the boys who worked on the plantation. He

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told him where the skipper wanted to go, and the boy stepped along the bridge. Red prepared to follow him.

‘Don’t fall in,’ said Neilson.

‘Not on your life.’

Neilson watched him make his way across, and when he had disappeared among the coconuts he looked still. Then he sank heavily in his chair. Was that the man who had prevented him from being happy? Was that the man whom Sally had loved all these years and for whom she had waited so desperately? It was grotesque. A sudden fury seized him so that he had an instinct to spring up and smash everything around him. He had been cheated. They had seen each other at last and had not known it. He began to laugh, mirthlessly, and his laughter grew till it became hysterical. The gods had played him a cruel trick. And he was old now.

At last Sally came in, to tell him dinner was ready. He sat down in front of her and tried to eat. He wondered what she would say if he told her now that the fat old man sitting in the chair was the lover whom she remembered still with the passionate abandonment of her youth. Years ago, when he hated her because she made him so unhappy, he would have been glad to tell her. He wanted to hurt her then as she hurt him, because his hatred was only love. But now he did not care. He shrugged his shoulders listlessly.

‘What did that man want?’ she asked presently.

He did not answer at once. She was old, too, a fat old native woman. He wondered why he had ever loved her so madly. He had laid at her feet all the treasures of his soul, and she had cared nothing for them.

Waste, what waste!

And now, when he looked at her, he felt only contempt. His patience was at last exhausted. He answered her question.

‘He’s the captain of a schooner. He’s come from Apia.’

'Yes.'

'He brought me news from home. My eldest brother
is very ill and I must go back.'

'Will you be gone long?'

He shrugged his shoulders.

BY
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



THE GAMBLER'S ROAD

PIERRE GOURDAIN, son of the Niçois millionaire jeweller, and one of the young elegants of the Sporting Club at Monte Carlo, presented himself at the main Bureau de Change with only a weak effort at that immobility of expression which, in the life of the Casino, is counted part of the equipment of the chic gambler. Both hands were filled with enormous red plaques, and he had no sooner deposited them upon the desk than, from his bulging pocket, he produced two more handfuls. The cashier, with a little skilful manipulation, spread them before him in rows of ten.

‘Un—deux—trois—quatre—et soixante, monsieur. Quatre cent soixante mille francs.’

‘C’est ça!’ the young man murmured, struggling to keep the elation from his tone. ‘J’ai touché le zéro trois avec le maximum. Il faut gagner de temps en temps.’

The cashier produced an incredible pile of mille notes, done up in series of ten. He turned them over with an agile forefinger, pausing to examine more closely a small portion of them.

‘There is some sealing wax which has fallen upon the backs of these,’ he pointed out. ‘Monsieur objects?’

‘Not in the least,’ the young man assured him.

The forty-six packets were in due course transferred to

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the pocket of the fortunate young man. There happened to be no other client for the moment, and the two were alone. The cashier leaned forward.

'Monsieur returns to Nice to-night?' he enquired.

The young man nodded.

'Naturally.'

The cashier looked up and down the room.

'Monsieur will play to-morrow night?'

'Without a doubt. Whilst the Sporting Club is open, I play nowhere else.'

The Gourdain was a well-known local family, and the cashier was a born Monégasque. He leaned forward once more.

'Why not leave a portion at least of that money, Monsieur Gourdain,' he suggested. 'I will give you a note for it, and you can collect it when you arrive to-morrow.'

The young man shook his head.

'Why should I do that?' he protested. 'My banker thinks that I gamble too heavily. To-morrow I shall show him; I shall deposit half, and bring the remainder away with me. He will believe, then, that it is possible to win. It will amuse me, this!'

'Four hundred and sixty thousand francs is a great deal of money to take with you from here to Nice at three o'clock in the morning,' the cashier warned him.

The young man's smile was one of complete confidence.

'Why, my friend,' he expostulated, 'this is one of the safest roads of Europe. I have traversed it a hundred times without molestation. Besides, in a car at a hundred kilometres an hour, what can be done? I stop for no one. That I can promise.'

There was a rush of business, and the fortunate gambler passed on. He lingered at the bar for a word with Joseph and a final whiskey and soda. The popular barman leaned across the counter.

'Monsieur has had good fortune to-night.'

Pierre Gourdain smiled.

'Good enough to ask you to take one of those boxes of cigars home with you, Joseph.'

'That is very kind of monsieur,' was the grateful acknowledgment. 'But, Monsieur Gourdain?'

'Well?'

Joseph leaned even a little further across the counter.

'Why not leave some of your winnings with me?' he suggested. 'It goes into the safe, or I can get you a Casino cheque.'

'What on earth for? I am going straight back to Nice, and, as you see, I am, as always, sober.'

'Naturally,' was the half-whispered reply, 'but the road between here and Nice——'

'Why, it is the safest in the world!' the young man interrupted. 'I pass along it all hours of the night and morning, four times a week. I ought to know. I have never heard anything more than a rumour of any attempt at robbery.'

Joseph was across the counter now—head and shoulders.

'Ecoutez, Monsieur Gourdain,' he begged eagerly. 'Up till last week, yes; since last week, even the night before last, there has been trouble on the road.'

'What do you mean? Robbery?'

Joseph nodded.

'There is an American who was staying at Nice, in hospital at the present moment. He was robbed of fifty thousand francs—as yet he is not able to explain how.'

'I have heard nothing of this,' Pierre Gourdain declared. 'There has been nothing in the newspapers.'

'The newspapers, no,' Joseph remarked meaningly. 'Do we read much in the newspapers, Monsieur Gourdain, of what happens in Monte Carlo, save of the Galas, and of the brilliant crowd at the Sporting Club, and of the great winnings? Nevertheless, this is the truth. There was, besides the American, a man found dead two mornings ago

in the road near Cap d'Ail, and not a sign or a word as to how he got there—a man in evening clothes, with empty pockets. What does one think? I ask you, Monsieur Gourdain?’

Joseph stepped back to yield smilingly to a call upon his till. The young jeweller sipped his whiskey and soda thoughtfully. How did these people get to hear such things, he wondered? And, stranger still, how was it that other people did not get to hear them? Joseph presently returned.

‘Who is to know, Joseph,’ Gourdain asked him, ‘that I leave here to-night with my pockets full of money?’

It was evident that the conversation was distressing to the barman. He hesitated for a moment, and his manner became reluctant. Nevertheless, he answered his young client’s question.

‘Monsieur Gourdain,’ he confided, ‘it has been said, and it would appear that there might be truth in it, that there are spies about here, that when a large win comes to anyone out of Monte Carlo, like you, the news is passed on by telephone. I speak more than I should, perhaps, but I have my ideas.’

One of the perambulating deities of the place crossed the threshold of the bar, and looked around the room. Joseph faded away like a ghost. Monsieur Gourdain paid one of his linen-coated assistants for his drink, and made his thoughtful departure. As he struggled into his heavy overcoat, a person whom he had passed on the stairs, entered the telephone booth.

Four o’clock glowed upon his illuminated timepiece as Tresholm, homeward bound from Toulon, swung round one of the last of the terrible curves of the Lower Corniche close to Cap d'Ail, and pressed down his brakes with the practised hand and foot of a fine driver. Against the high

bank on his left; all the elements of tragedy were disclosed to him by his cautiously operated headlight. He turned it off, and descended. His chauffeur, jumping from the dicky seat, was already in the road.

'An accident, I'm afraid,' Treshold muttered.

'It's that Lancia car from Nice, sir,' the man volunteered.

They both hurried forward. There was an overturned car, leaning against the bank, an ambulance waggon drawn up just short of it, and a prostrate form upon the ground, over which a woman in nurse's costume and a man, who had the appearance of a doctor, were bending. A gendarme, in the Monégasque uniform, turned towards the two new arrivals.

'What is it that has arrived?' Tresholm asked quickly.

'A motor accident,' the man replied. 'Monsieur would do well to proceed. There is by chance here a doctor and a nurse. Further aid is not necessary.'

But for that last sentence, Tresholm, without a doubt, would have climbed back into his car, would have passed the sad little scene slowly, and proceeded on his journey to Monte Carlo. He had years of experience behind him, however, and in the days when life and death were always in the balance he had learnt to suspect a superfluous sentence.

'You are of the gendarmerie of Beaulieu or Nice?' he enquired, looking at the man's uniform.

'It is of no consequence, that. Monsieur will be pleased to proceed. My orders are to allow no one to loiter.'

'Your orders? From whom?'

'Monsieur le Docteur Earnshaw,' was the prompt response. 'It is a question whether the injured man will live. A crowd around him would be fatal. Pass on, if you please.'

'I myself have some knowledge of medicine,' Tresholm persisted. 'I may be of assistance.'

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He deliberately avoided the man's outstretched arm, and approached the prostrate form. The doctor, a clean-shaven, grey-haired man, swung round at the sound of his footsteps. The nurse, who was leaning down on the other side, pushed her veil back, and looked at him with startled eyes.

'There has been an accident, I fear?' Tresholm asked. 'Can I be of any assistance?'

The doctor hesitated for a moment. There was a look of distress in his face, and his black coat and dark trousers were covered with dust.

'You and your chauffeur can help us carry this unfortunate fellow to our ambulance, if you will be so kind,' he suggested.

'What happened?' Tresholm ventured.

'We scarcely saw,' the doctor replied. 'He passed us, travelling at a tremendous speed at the beginning of the turn there. Perhaps he did not allow himself quite enough room. Perhaps he had drunk too much. He gave a tremendous skid, hit the side of the bank, and the car turned over. We found him lying by the roadside here.'

'Is he seriously hurt?'

'I can find no signs of life.'

The four men picked up the prostrate form with ease and carried him to the ambulance. The nurse arranged the pillows for his head. Still he gave no sign of life, and the blood was already coming through the bandage on his head, and trickling down on to his clothes.

'How far do you go?' Tresholm asked.

'To Nice,' the doctor answered. 'I have a small clinic in the Rue Dubouchage. My name is Doctor Earnshaw.'

'I seem to know the young man by sight,' Tresholm reflected.

'He is quite well known in Nice,' the doctor confided gravely. 'He is the son of a very rich jeweller—a great gambler, I fear. Thank you so much for your help, sir.'

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Tresholm returned thoughtfully to his car. He paused to light a cigarette, and watched the departing ambulance thread its careful way round the curve until it disappeared.

'We'll get along, Johnson,' he called out to his chauffeur, who was on his knees, examining the wreck of the Lancia.

The man rose at once, and brushed the dust from his clothes.

'Queer things, them skids, sir,' he remarked. 'The road's as dry as a bone at the turn here, and there ain't too much dust. Beside that, the front of the car's all smashed in, as though it had hit something solid. The bank's all soft enough. No more than an odd bit of rock or two that wouldn't hurt anything.'

Tresholm crossed the road at once, and examined the car with his chauffeur. The terrible condition of the bonnet and the smashed front springs seemed, on the face of it, difficult to understand.

'It does seem queer,' Tresholm ruminated.

'I've never seen the front of a car buckled up like that before, sir, just with running up a bank,' the man commented. 'Looks to me as though there might have been a bit of dirty work before the doctor and the ambulance car came along. He wouldn't think anything about that naturally, seeing the car overturned here, and the man dead or unconscious.'

Tresholm walked a few paces along the road. They were some distance from any habitation, except for the ghostly Château d'Ail, whose empty windows had looked down upon the road for forty years. Tresholm studied them meditatively. Then he returned to his car.

'The young man's face was familiar to me,' he repeated, as he climbed into the driving seat. 'I fancy he's been pointed out as a gambler from Nice.'

Johnson leaned forward from his place.

'I know the car, sir,' he confided. 'I've seen it doing a cool hundred along this road more than once. Never

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ought to be allowed, the way they drives on these curves. That was one who got what was coming to him, anyway.'

Tresholm, a few nights later, the rare and unwilling victim of a Gala dinner, unfolded his napkin, and glanced sideways at the card of the woman on his left. She caught his eye, smiled, and adjusted the strip of pasteboard so that he could read it more easily.

'Earnshaw,' she murmured, 'Isobel Earnshaw. That is my name. Yours I know, but I wonder whether you can remember where we met last?'

Tresholm was genuinely intrigued. There was something about the woman's eyes, the softness of her voice, the deliberation with which she had crossed the room, which was in a way reminiscent. She was a handsome woman, very beautifully dressed in one of those elusive black frocks which, to the uninitiated, seem simple and yet cost a famous dress designer more hours of anxious thought than the more flamboyant raiment with which his sales-rooms are littered. Her pearls were beautiful, her plainly coiffured hair attractive. The sense of familiarity was there all right, but for once Tresholm was at a loss.

'I have seen you somewhere recently,' he admitted. 'The amazing thing is, though, that I cannot recall where.'

'I will not spoil your dinner by leaving you guessing. Those were very tragical moments in which we met. Three or four o'clock in the morning, it must have been, a mist over the moon, the commencement of a mistral—and that terrible accident.'

'You were the nurse!' he exclaimed.

She nodded.

'And my husband was the doctor. You can see him on the other side of the table. It was a great grief to us both that we were unable to do anything for that poor young man. He must have been dead several minutes before we arrived.'

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'It was a horrible tragedy,' Tresholm acknowledged gravely.

'It was indeed,' she assented. 'I cannot think, Mr. Tresholm, why we English people do not try to bring our influence to bear upon the authorities here to stop this reckless driving. They estimated that the young man must have gone round that corner at at least eighty kilometres an hour.'

'What I find even more difficult to understand,' Tresholm confided, 'is the extraordinary reticence of the newspapers when an accident of this sort takes place. One single paragraph in the paper is all that I have seen—just a brief account of a motor accident, and the death of the driver. Yet it seems to me——'

'Yes?'

'It seems to me, that the affair has been very easily dismissed.'

'In what way?'

Tresholm, glancing idly down the table, suddenly caught the eye of a man whom he recognised as the doctor. They exchanged friendly nods. For a moment afterwards, Tresholm's attention was engaged by the sommelier descanting upon the rival merits of a dry Pouilly, or a St. Julien, with his salmon.

'Well,' he explained a little later, 'in England there would have been a terrible fuss. We should have had diagrams of the road, and photographs of the smashed car. We should have had pages of your evidence, and your husband's, and a dozen theories as to the exact cause of the skid.'

'The French are not like that,' she observed. 'An accident such as this, in the very centre of a great pleasure spot, is a thing, from their point of view, to be glossed over, to be dismissed in as few words as possible. I am not sure that they are not right. It is simply pandering to the sensation-mongers to dilate upon the details of a tragedy.'

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Besides, if it should be a police affair—which this, fortunately, is not—what a help the newspapers are in England to the criminal. They teach the guilty person exactly what to expect—they even go so far as to say sometimes upon what lines the police are working.'

'In the case of a crime, I agree with you entirely,' he assented, after a moment's reflection. 'In this case, however, when there is no suggestion of anything of the sort, one might have expected a few further details.'

She shrugged her shoulders, and turned to answer a remark from her left-hand neighbour. Tresholm leaned towards his hostess, Lady Westerton.

'We were speaking of that poor young man's motor accident on his way back to Nice,' he explained. 'One has seen so little of it in the papers.'

'I was remarking the same thing to my husband this morning,' Lady Westerton agreed. 'Have they ever found any trace of all that money he was supposed to have with him?'

Tresholm turned once more to Mrs. Earnshaw.

'Lady Westerton was saying something about the young man having had a large sum of money,' he observed.

'An exaggeration, I should imagine,' she commented thoughtfully. 'He was undressed at the Clinic naturally. The night sister took my place, but I am sure I should have heard of it if he had had any unusual sum.'

She leaned across the table, and spoke to her husband.

'Lady Westerton has been telling us that that poor young Monsieur Gourdain was supposed to have a considerable sum of money in his possession.'

'Seven mille, three hundred and some odd change,' her husband replied. 'I know because I looked it up.'

'There are always rumours of that sort,' Isobel Earnshaw reminded them. 'In this case, however, it must have been a mistake, for there was certainly no time for anyone to have robbed him, and to have got away, before we arrived on the scene.'

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A guest from the other side of the table intervened.

‘There is no doubt that the young man won a very large sum that night,’ he said, ‘but he probably left it somewhere in Monte Carlo.’

‘He had plenty of time,’ the doctor remarked. ‘They say that he left the Sporting Club at three o’clock. It couldn’t have taken him more than ten minutes to get to Cap d’Ail, and it was nearly four before we came upon him.’

Tresholm looked up quickly, opened his lips, but closed them again. Someone spoke of the new supper place that everyone was going to. Finis, with poor young Monsieur Gourdain.

The party broke up as usual with a general exodus to the Sporting Club. Tresholm found himself afflicted with a curious fit of uneasiness. He watched the play for a time, wandered around, exchanging amenities with a few acquaintances, and then, acting upon a sudden impulse, descended the stairs, and strolled out into the soft night. He walked the length of the Terrace, turned into the gardens, and, returning, found himself in front of the Casino. He joined the thin stream of entrants, and made his leisurely progress through the ‘Kitchen’. Suddenly, he came to a standstill. Mrs. Earnshaw was seated at one of the tables, playing, and playing, as he saw at once, for very high stakes. He watched her closely. She had a book in her hand, which she studied before each bet, but she was, nevertheless, losing, and losing consistently. He changed his place, and strolled round behind her. She must have had four mille in the stakes on the table, mostly around twenty-one, and on red. Twenty-two, black, turned up. Her reluctant fingers stole into her bag. She drew out a packet of notes, and passed five of them to the croupier. Tresholm for a moment almost betrayed himself. On the backs of the notes, clearly to be seen from where he stood,

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were little splutterings of red sealing wax. Tresholm's fingers tightened upon the rail of the chef's high chair. He watched the notes disappear into the tronc of the table, and the plaques handed over. Then he walked silently away. The sordid, crowded room existed no longer. He looked into the darkness, heard the rustling of the coming mistral in the pine trees, saw the flickering beams of the moonlight upon the white road, the little group of figures, the young man fresh from his victorious evening, sobbing out his last breath, watched those white, cool fingers, stealing in and out of his pockets.

Tresholm made friends with the Chef de Sureté of the Principality. It was rather a one-sided affair, for that functionary was reserved, although polite, and Tresholm was on the borderland of being inquisitive. He refused to observe Monsieur Desrolles's obvious desire to avoid the subject, and persisted in discussing the tragedy of the Lower Corniche Road.

'You see, monsieur,' he ventured, 'it is not as though it were the first affair of the sort. There have been, I gather, two others presenting similar characteristics.'

Monsieur Desrolles looked at him keenly.

'From whom have you that information?' he demanded.

'I gathered it with difficulty,' Tresholm replied evasively. 'Nevertheless, there was Monsieur Pierre Laval, the Contractor from Saint Raphael, who was found dead, with a burst tyre on his car, not a mile away from the scene of the present tragedy. He, too, is reported to have been winning at the Casino, yet, when he was discovered, he had barely a mille note upon him. Then there was the wine-grower from Juan-les-Pins—I have forgotten his name—and his was a small affair—but he certainly had winnings amounting to seventy or eighty thousand francs in his pocket, when he left the Casino, of which there were no traces whatever when his body was found upon the

roadside. It may be, as you say, a dangerous road, Monsieur Desrolles, but it is odd that these three accidents should have happened to men who left Monte Carlo with large sums of money which were never seen again.'

'The affairs in question are occupying my department,' the Chef de Sureté declared. 'At the same time, let me remind you of this—there is no direct evidence that any one of these three people whom you have mentioned actually had large sums of money in their possession when the accidents occurred. Young Monsieur Gourdain, for instance, is known to have called somewhere in Monte Carlo on his homeward way, and also at a dancing place in Cap d'Ail. Lavalley sat in a café for two hours on his return journey, and the person to whom you refer, from Juan, was, according to the medical testimony, sodden with drink. You see, all these three might well have been robbed elsewhere than upon the scene of the accident itself.'

'That is perfectly true,' Tresholm admitted, 'but as against that, no traces of the money have been discovered.'

'How do you know?'

'Well, there has been no word of it in the papers.'

'In England,' the Chef de Sureté pointed out, 'you are very foolish people with your newspapers. You often make escape from justice a very easy thing for the criminal. You show him in what direction the police are working, and against whom their suspicions are directed. That is not our method.'

'Admitting all this,' Tresholm insisted patiently, 'do you honestly believe, Monsieur Desrolles, that these three tragedies which have taken place within the last five weeks are all just ordinary accidents?'

'My natural answer to you, Monsieur Tresholm, is that we have no reason to suppose otherwise,' was the dry rejoinder. 'In your case, as you are a friend of Monsieur Robert's, I will treat you with some confidence, and I will

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venture to remind you of one fact. The amateur detective does not exist in France. We find that official business proceeds more satisfactorily without interference from outsiders.'

Tresholm looked thoughtfully out of the somewhat dusty window across the Port. He was increasingly aware of the fact that his host was tired of his visit and desired to get rid of him.

'Monsieur Desrolles,' he said, 'I am not an amateur detective, and I have no wish to force your hand in any way. For anything I know, you may be on the point of making an arrest in connection with the *affaire* Gourdain. If that is so, your caution is justified, but unnecessary. I will walk away from here with a seal upon my lips. If it is not so, please listen to what I have to say.'

'I will listen to what you have to say, Monsieur Tresholm,' the other decided.

'The clerk at the *caisse* who handed Gourdain notes for some of his winnings is reported to have apologised for a number of them having been spluttered with small drops of red sealing wax. I have seen some notes spluttered in the same fashion within the last twenty-four hours.'

The expression of Desrolles had undergone no appreciable change, but there was, without a doubt, a keener light in his eyes.

'Where?'

'In the Casino.'

'You would recognise the person who passed them?'

'Certainly I should. I could tell you her name now, if you would like to hear it.'

'I am listening.'

'Her name is Isobel Earnshaw. She is the wife of the doctor whom I saw upon the road bandaging the young man's head that night.'

It was a commonplace looking apartment, with its whitewashed walls, dusty ceiling, linoleum-covered

floor, and hard official furniture. Nevertheless, at that moment, the whole atmosphere of the room seemed curiously changed. There was a sense of drama in the musty air. Even Tresholm was confused at the result of his words. Whether from shock, or for some other reason, Desrolles was incapable of speech. A livid patch of lifeless colour streaked his cheeks. For a moment, Tresholm had the queer feeling that the man was personally affected. Even his tongue seemed palsied.

'The lady in question,' Tresholm went on, breaking at last the pause, 'was gambling in the "Kitchen" for sums which, for a Doctor's wife, were enormous. I suggest, sir, that you look up the dossiers of Doctor Earnshaw and his wife.'

The functionary was himself again. There was a new and rasping note in his voice, however.

'There is no one in the neighbourhood,' he announced scornfully, 'who needs to look at a police dossier of Doctor Earnshaw, or his wife. The Doctor has practised in Nice for at least seventeen years, served in the war, and has amassed, without doubt, a comfortable fortune. He has been married for twelve years, and his wife enjoys the respect of the whole community. She won every distinction that was possible for a woman during the war, ending up by being in charge of our largest hospital. She was personally decorated by the President.'

Tresholm was genuinely staggered.

'A wonderful record,' he admitted.

'So wonderful,' Desrolles continued, 'that your very suggestion, I must say, took my breath away. There are many bundles of mille notes, Monsieur Tresholm, which bear traces of sealing wax.'

Tresholm rose unwillingly to his feet.

'After what you have told me, Monsieur Desrolles——'

'No, sit down,' the other interrupted. 'We must consider this matter apart from the sentimental point of view.'

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Any theory you may have formed concerning Earnshaw and his wife is, of course, absurd, yet, tell me, what was in your mind? What had you to propose?"

'Simply this. I am fond of an adventure—a gambler outside the gaming rooms, you understand. I had an idea of leaving the Sporting Club a heavy winner one night, and testing the affair by going to Nice myself. If you approved of my plan, and were willing to help me, I thought that might, perhaps, solve this mystery.'

Desrolles was scribbling with his pen upon a scrap of paper. His head was leaning upon his hand. His face was half hidden.

'Your plan is worth trying,' he conceded. 'See me later, and we will work out the details, and in the meantime, Monsieur Tresholm, let me impress upon you one thing—the necessity for entire and inviolable discretion. Upon that condition alone, we work together.'

'I agree,' Tresholm assented.

On the following night, Tresholm justified himself at last in the eyes of all Monte Carlo. The news went flashing from the Sporting Club back to the Hotel and through the Casino. The attack upon its resources was opened. Tresholm had bought a million francs worth of plaques, and was playing a steady, systematic game of roulette in maximums. An hour later, a further bulletin was issued. Affairs were going ill with the intrepid gambler. He was half a million down, and losing steadily. Gustave Sordel, hurrying through the passage, chuckled to himself. It was a tardy triumph, but worth while. Save that Tresholm glanced now and then at the clock, he played very much like a machine. He backed the same numbers, and every possible combination of them without flinching at his losses. His luck began to turn, when a vacated place next to the croupier on the opposite side of the table was taken by a woman who had been standing in the background.

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Their eyes met as she sat down. Whatever surprise Tresholm felt, he succeeded in concealing it. His greeting was friendly, if not too impressive. Following her first smile, however, was a look in her beautiful eyes which puzzled him. He had suddenly become of some account to her. So might she have looked at him if, by some incredible chance, she had been hidden in the room, and overheard his conversation with Desrolles. She had betrayed only a single trace of it, but she was afraid.

Luck at the tables is a singular thing, or the world's interest in that mechanical toy, the roulette wheel, would long since have evaporated. The woman opposite him was playing on black numbers of low denominations. Tresholm, with every stake, was, as he had been all the time, directly opposed to her. From the moment of her sitting down, his numbers dominated the board. In five spins, he won *en plein* three times. His luck was prodigious. The heap of discs in front of him grew and grew. As he won, his vis-à-vis lost; as his pile of plaques increased, hers diminished. Once or twice, she looked across at him. Their contest seemed to have affected her nerves. Her lips were trembling. The fingers which handled her remaining *jetons* shook.

'You are invincible, Mr. Tresholm,' she murmured.

'You are playing against the table,' he rejoined. 'The run of it is for my numbers. . . .'

At one o'clock she left off playing, and at a quarter past Tresholm rose to his feet. Two *valets de pied* brought bowls for his plaques, and the cashier at the desk handed him back his cheque for a million, which he had cashed at the beginning of the evening, and over a million in mille notes. For once he broke through his habit of silence.

'It is perhaps as well for the Casino, Monsieur Tresholm,' he said diffidently, 'that you are only an occasional player. Would you like me to send one of the clerks up with you to your room, or to the Hotel safe?'

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'Thanks very much,' Tresholm replied, 'but I am staying at the Negresco at Nice—moved in there yesterday.'

The man stared at him for a moment. Then he took off his spectacles, wiped them, and leaned a little forward.

'You are not going to make that journey, Monsieur Tresholm, with all this money,' he expostulated.

'As a matter of fact, I must. I am a very careful driver though. I do not think that anything is likely to happen to me.'

'Leave the money with us,' the man urged. 'We'll telephone it to you at Nice to-morrow morning.'

Tresholm smiled.

'You know what they call me here, monsieur,' he confided—'“the professional gambler”'. That is because I like to take an occasional risk.'

He stuffed the most magnificent offering which the desk had ever received into the depository provided for it, and strolled away. In the bar he called for a whiskey and soda. Joseph welcomed him cordially.

'Walk quickly through the passages, monsieur,' he advised. 'A million francs burns in the pocket.'

'I'm not going through any passages,' Tresholm told him. 'I am going to Nice.'

The smile faded from the man's lips in a manner almost ludicrous. He stood for a moment with his mouth open—the picture of consternation.

'Nice?' he faltered.

Tresholm nodded.

'I'm staying at the Negresco for a few days,' he confided. Joseph leaned across the counter.

'Leave your money with me, sir,' he begged. 'It will be safe—that I swear.'

'I think it will be pretty safe with me,' Tresholm rejoined, sipping his drink.

Joseph was very worried.

'Mr. Tresholm,' he pleaded, 'you are a brave man, like

most great gamblers. Do not be foolhardy. Monsieur Gourdain——'

'But Gourdain was driving a motor car at eighty kilometres an hour round a corner,' Tresholm argued, 'and I'm not going to do anything of that sort.'

There was a rush of custom, and Joseph moved reluctantly away. Tresholm finished his drink, and turned to leave the room. In the entrance, he came face to face with Isobel Earnshaw.

'Better luck now I've left?' he asked pleasantly.

She ignored his question, laid her long nervous fingers upon his arm and drew him into the little recess.

'Mr. Tresholm,' she said, 'you will think that my nerves have all gone because I have been losing to-night, but it is not that. I have a superstition—a real one—don't go to Nice to-night.'

'But, my dear lady!' he protested. 'Why not? It is a much travelled road. I am not like these young men—a reckless driver—and I shall call nowhere on the way.'

Her face was so close to his, that he could almost feel the warmth of her breath.

'Nevertheless,' she went on, 'I implore you—do not go.'

Their eyes met for a single moment. Hers fell.

'Madame,' he said, 'this, I believe, is kindness, which I shall always remember, and for which I thank you. Good-night!'

He passed out, and down the stairs. As he stood waiting for his hat and overcoat, someone hurried into the telephone booth.

It was about an hour and a half later, and the Sporting Club was still crowded, when Tresholm made his unexpected reappearance. He strolled into the bar, and made his way towards a vacant stool. Joseph, who was handing a champagne cocktail across the counter, promptly dropped the glass, which went crashing on to

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the floor, and stared at the newcomer as though he were a ghost. A couple of men at the counter looked round, and welcomed Tresholm with surprise.

'You changed your mind, sir?' Joseph asked breathlessly.

Tresholm knocked a cigarette upon the table, and indicated the particular brand of whiskey he preferred.

'Not exactly that,' he admitted. 'I found the road just beyond Cap d'Ail practically in the hands of the Police, and such a hullabaloo going on that I thought I'd come back.'

Gustave Sordel, who had been at the bar, leaned forward.

'What then has arrived?' he demanded.

Tresholm paused for a moment, and in that moment, he heard soft movements; a waft of perfume—surely he had smelt it once before—crept his way. The woman's dress was almost touching his knees. He had no need to turn his head; he knew who had stolen up on to the vacant stool by his side.

'Well,' he replied, 'do you happen to know a sort of a deserted Château—they called it the "Haunted Château"—on the road near Cap d'Ail?'

'Naturally. All the world knows it,' Sordel assented. 'Proceed.'

There was a little indrawn breath on his other side—almost a sob. Tresholm was merciful. He avoided the temptation of a dramatic recital. He spoke quickly, almost hurriedly.

'I found a barrier across the road there,' he recounted. 'The Nice police had got possession of the place. From the little I could gather, it seems to have been temporarily in the possession of a doctor who was thinking of making a clinic there. I suppose, though, someone had got hold of the place before him, and just round the bend there was a most diabolical affair, worked by an engine from a secret opening in the wood, which dragged up an iron

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structure on to the right hand side of the road. That's the thing young Gourdain ran into, of course, and they say others. As a matter of fact, it was out to-night—for me.'

There was a babel of questions. They crowded round Tresholm. He pushed them back.

'Can't you see that Mrs. Earnshaw isn't well?' he protested. 'Give me some brandy, Joseph.'

'But, tell us,' Sordel began——

'Was anyone arrested?' someone else intervened.

The fingers of the woman gripped his arm. She had recovered. She was deathly pale, but her eyes commanded.

'Go on,' she insisted. 'Tell your story.'

'There is not so much to tell,' he obeyed reluctantly. 'Half-a-dozen arrests were made, amongst whom—it was ridiculous, of course,' he added, turning once more to Mrs. Earnshaw, 'but your husband was nominal owner of the property—so, as a matter of form——'

'That will do, please,' she interrupted. 'What else?'

'Let me take you home,' he begged.

'If you don't tell me everything,' she gasped, 'I shall die. Can't you see—I must know.'

'There was another tragedy,' he confided. 'Monsieur Desrolles—no doubt it was a point of honour with him—he thought that the Nice police had been too officious—he drove up, passed me on the way, in fact, found out what had happened, and blew his brains out.'

There was a little shiver of emotion. Isobel Earnshaw had stretched out her hand for the brandy, and her fingers were quite steady.

'You have yourself received a slight wound, Monsieur Tresholm,' Sordel remarked.

Tresholm dabbed his cheek with his handkerchief, and nodded.

'A bloodthirsty night,' he observed. 'Someone took a pot shot at me from a car which passed. I had just turned my head fortunately.'

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The woman dropped a little white pellet into her glass. There was a furore of conversation. She drew closer to Tresholm.

'It was Armand Desrolles who tried to shoot you,' she confided. 'He was my lover. I am glad he didn't. You're a brave man anyhow, although you deceived Armand and went for the Nice Police.'

She drained the contents of her glass. Tresholm suddenly saw the cloudiness of the liquid and snatched at it, but he was too late. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

'An affair of sixty seconds,' she assured him. 'You took a gambler's chance anyhow, and I like you for it.'

'Tresholm,' someone called out—'Mr. Tresholm!'

He turned his head. Another voice was raised above the general hubbub.

'Look out! What's happened to Mrs. Earnshaw?'

She slipped from her stool—graceful to the last, clinging to his shoulder to break her fall. Her arm dragged him down, her pale lips whispered in his ear.

'I was a gambler from birth, through life—to death,' she faltered. 'You, too. Good-bye!'

BY
SIR MAX PEMBERTON



THE BRAIN DRUG

‘AND yet,’ said the Prince, while he permitted the light of a candle to shine through the little phial he held between his fingers, ‘and yet there is no reason why genius should not owe something to a drug.’

Plain John Macclesfield of Bradford was very much astonished.

‘Do you mean to tell me,’ he rejoined, ‘that you can make brains for a man who has not got them?’

Prince Otto had expected the question and he smiled when he heard it.

‘I have never had a doubt of it,’ said he; ‘we can as readily and as surely make men of genius as we can make men of muscle. The grey matter of the brain is as capable of being fed and strengthened as the bones of a child who suffers from rickets. Look at Anna here. Twelve years ago the physicians of Venice and of Rome gave her six months to live. I put their advice aside and treated her myself. Look and tell me what you think of her now!’

Plain John Macclesfield looked at Anna, but he did not see her. He had not the imagination which could be moved by that contrast of age and youth—the beauty of a young Italian girl at its zenith, and the white hair of the savant who had set London by the ears. Whence came this aged Prince who had lived here,

in this little house by Berkeley Square, as though he were some magician of the Orient? The very dinner-table, with its Venetian glass and priceless Chinese porcelain, the scent of incense about the heavy curtains, the Turkish dishes, the distant music of an organ, these and the figure of the white-haired seer, whose eyes shone like precious stones newly lifted from the depths of the sea, would have impressed many, but failed to make any sort of appeal to the man from Bradford.

John had come to the house to find out what chance there was of doing a deal in British 'woollens' with a people in Dalmatia supposed to be reduced to comparative nakedness. And here he was being shown something in a bottle which his host declared would turn a dullard into a man of genius.

'It's very interesting, Prince,' he remarked, his observation hardly soaring above the commonplace. 'I've often thought that if I had the right kind of brain I would make a big figure in public life. What is a Prime Minister anyway? A man who can talk to 'em—a windbag who gets on a platform and says what the other two thousand there couldn't say—while, when it comes to a sound business proposition, there are hundreds in Bradford who could make rings round him. What we want is the particular kind of smartness they call genius. If you've got it in that bottle, you're a wonder.'

The Prince took a cigarette from a box of green jade upon the table before him, and for a little while he smoked in silence.

'Mr. Macclesfield,' he said at length, 'if you care to put yourself into my hands, I will in six months make your name known throughout the world as one of the greatest speakers and thinkers your country has ever produced. But you would have to trust me absolutely; your will must be subject to mine, and what I tell you to do, that must be done.'

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John shook his head as one who would like to be convinced, but is not.

‘What about my business?’ he asked bluntly.

Prince Otto shrugged his shoulders.

‘You are very rich, are you not?’

‘Oh, well, as to that—why, yes, in a way, I am.’

‘And you have dreamed dreams of great fame?’

‘Certainly, I have thought sometimes that there are other things in the world besides wool.’

‘Trust yourself to me and I will find for you the brains you desire.’

‘Out of that bottle, Prince?’

The Prince picked up the phial and held it once more to the light. The colour of it was glorious. Even as he looked upon it John Macclesfield thought that a strange and subtle change had come upon him. He gazed upon the flowers before him and saw that they were beautiful.

‘You’re jesting, Prince,’ he exclaimed, without waiting for the old man’s answer; and having said it, he helped himself to port.

Prince Otto watched his daughter Anna as she sat before the organ in his study, and his keen mind read all her thoughts as surely as though they were spoken aloud.

‘She is fascinated by this Englishman,’ he was telling himself. ‘She is now thinking that he is very different from the men she knew in Italy; and she likes his honesty. The very physique of the fellow has made its appeal. Here is a thing which only the physiologist can understand. This plain John Macclesfield has no brains, but he has wonderful shoulders and the hair of the Saxon. She adores him, and would marry him if he were clever.’

As though to confirm his opinion, he now addressed to her a question about the guest who had just left him.

‘Anna, what do you think of Mr. Macclesfield?’ he asked.

She had ceased to play and sat in a reverie, her face turned towards the fire. A glow of light passed fitfully

across her gold-red hair and showed her winsome face as though it were the face of a picture with a flickering lamp before it. Some would have thought it odd that John Macclesfield should not have discovered her, but Prince Otto was by no means surprised. He, however, waited for her answer to his question with the attentive air which betrays some little anxiety.

'I do not know,' she said simply. 'These Englishmen are very hard to understand; their silence is so often their cleverness.'

The Prince assented to that.

'They have brains,' he said, 'but not our brains. We must attribute it, my child, as much to their climate as to their surroundings. This man lives in a world of wool. His visions are of pastures and sheep, simply because he has been shown no others. He, I suppose, would speak of our volatile temperament. It is the word which in our case means two thousand years of sun and music. For what is the brain but a diaphragm upon which sound and light can play? And not only sound and light, but the will of other men. That is what you call education—the writing on the diaphragm by one who knows.

'If I were to will it, your Mr. Macclesfield would see visions at this very moment. He would open the gates of a world with which he is unfamiliar; he would hear words he had never heard before, and utter them aloud. Men would come to say that they had not known him hitherto. Who knows—his name might become famous and he would forget his sheep? He is, in my judgment, a man who would willingly do so. There is land there to be tilled, and it may be that I shall sow the seeds. Would it please you, my child, if I did so?'

Anna was greatly interested. She turned round and watched the Prince with wide eyes.

'Father,' she said, 'you have told me so often that you can make men clever. Do you really believe your own

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words? Is it possible to create genius—to bestow upon others the gifts you possess? Is it possible, father, or do you dream it?”

He would not tell her wholly. To an observer it might have seemed that he himself still debated the question in his own mind and had come to no sure conclusion.

‘There are drugs in the earth to make men wizards,’ he said; ‘we know it and we use them. He who takes opium may dream that he is king, and his kingdom will be real to him. He is all-powerful. He knows the secrets of life: he understands things in his sleep—things of which his brain knew nothing when waking.

‘We have to make that delusion permanent, and we have genius. Our problem is that of those who first saw the image upon a plate of glass but could not fix it there. When it was fixed, photography was born—that great and wonderful art which might yet open the vision to us.

‘If, similarly, we can fix the mental images our drugs create, we also have invented a new art, and shall revolutionise humanity. I have thought of this much, my child, since the war exiled me from my home and we became derelicts in a strange country. The world has suffered untold misfortunes for lack of the visions. Genius could have saved the world. Yet mankind has never asked if this power were not in its keeping. We labour to build bodies, but not to create brains. All the faculties profess to cure our ills; they seek to give us bone and flesh and muscle—never brains. It is because they have not the vision themselves, and so they do not seek visions. On the other hand, I have been seeking them all my life.’

‘And you have found them, father?’

He answered her very slowly:

‘I believe that I have found them. I believe that I can create them in others. At this moment, for instance, our friend John Macclesfield is forgetting the mills of that great city of Bradford, and has discovered suddenly that

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there are wonders of the night. He is looking up to the stars and asking himself about the visions. My words will come back to him presently and ambition will seize upon him. He will ask himself why he is but a plain merchant. He will remember that other men have gone from his city and have stood boldly before the nation. A voice will tell him that he would do well to follow them. He will realise the meaning of power; he will grasp at it. Who knows—perhaps he will attain it?"

Anna sighed as though she herself were not convinced.

'I found it so difficult to talk to him,' she said. 'He seemed quite unaware of my existence.'

The Prince smiled in a kindly way.

He had said truly that plain John Macclesfield was to become the victim of a vision. Perhaps if John had not dined extremely well, had not looked upon the wine when it was red, and even surrendered to the fascination of liqueurs, he might have thought no more of Prince Otto and his words. But he had been guilty of this surrender, and his mood reflected it when he returned to his apartments in the great hotel, and drew the curtains to look out over Hyde Park. Winter had but just passed, and these were the early days of a cold but glorious spring. A crescent moon glittered in a translucent sky and the stars were brilliant. John Macclesfield cared little for stars in a common way; but to-night he perceived their beauty.

'What an idea!' he said to himself, as he lighted a pipe and sat before the window to look upon a bewitching scene. 'The fellow says that he can create brains as other men create flesh. Well, and why not? It is a splendid notion, and it is odd that nobody has thought of it before.'

'Of course, I do not believe that he could turn a fool into an Isaac Newton, or that we are going to have Edisons while you wait; but this idea of creating brain power by a drug—well, it's fascinating anyway, and I wonder none of the doctors have thought about it. "Cannot do any harm"

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he says, "and in any case will do a man good,"—which reminds me that I brought the stuff home and that it is somewhere in one of my pockets. I will have a go at it, d——d if I don't! Who knows where I'd stop if I once got going on the lines I have often thought of? What is to prevent my making a name for myself? I have got the money, and money talks. But if I am to follow where the others have led, I must talk myself: I must know things—I must get the trick of it. The old fellow says it is there in his bottle, and, by gosh, it would be a rum go if it were!

'A clever man—I knew it when I saw him—unlike any other man I have ever met. His eyes go right through you; you almost feel as though he shot fire into your brain when he looks at you. A Dalmatian Prince who lived in a castle in the mountains and hopes one day to go back there—well, they know a lot in the East which the West never dreams about. I wonder what the devil is in his old bottle, anyway?'

He searched in the pocket of his overcoat and found the precious phial. The light showed its beauties here as it had showed them in the Prince's house, and when he removed the stopper from the bottle the perfume of the liquid was delicious.

Laughing as he did so, and assuring himself that it was a joke to be told in Bradford, John Macclesfield measured out fifteen drops from the phial and, adding water to them, he swallowed the draught and smacked his lips upon it. Of taste he said there was none, though the perfume of it still lingered in the room. He was thankful that no Bradford man was there to twit him for his folly and to laugh aloud at a claim so ridiculous.

Ten minutes afterwards he had forgotten all about the drug, but was still gazing out upon Hyde Park as though the beauty of the night continued to bewitch him. A sense of power had come to him suddenly, he knew not whence. He could people those deserted acres with a great mob

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which listened to his words. He was creating imaginary audiences which were swayed by his speech. He watched in imagination a great throng sweeping on to the House of Parliament at Westminster, and to his surprise he found himself at the head of it. In the chamber itself he delivered an oration which could dominate the European situation. In the lobbies men were saying, 'What an orator our John has become!'

Twenty-five years ago, he remembered, the little man from Wales was hardly more obscure than he. What was to prevent him from climbing to the summit? Nothing, he said; and, the vision passing, he remembered that it was almost two o'clock in the morning, and hurried to his bed.

But he had still to discover Anna, the daughter of Otto of Metkovitch, and her face had not been among his visions.

* * * * *

Bradford followed the career of John Macclesfield with an amazement which was real—also with guffaws.

The man, it said, had developed eccentricities bordering upon madness. It heard of a house in London to which he had invited great singers—he who knew no note of music. Famous pictures decorated his walls, and masterpieces had come from Italy—Madonnas and saints and other trash which had as little to do with sheep as the complexion of a fashionable woman with Nature.

That Macclesfield was going daft there seemed no doubt whatever.

'Sets himself up for a speaker,' said one worthy of the North, 'and has made a speech at the Central Hall, Westminster, which all the town is talking about. Such a dull dog he was before, at anything but the bone of commerce which he gnawed.'

Now he seemed like one bewitched—quick as lightning in repartee, and, as his reporters declared, eloquent in his periods and actually babbling phrases of Italian. Got a

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strange companion, too—an old foreign Prince about whom nobody knew much, yet whose daughter had created a sensation on the one occasion when she had gone to the Palace.

It was odd for plain John to be hob-nobbing with a pair like that; but it was a hundred times more odd to hear that he could open his mouth and say something, for never had such a dunce been known in Bradford when there was any public speaking to be done.

John himself knew no more than his auditors the secret of his amazing success. He could have told you strange things, however, and one of them would have had to do with the Prince's presence at all his meetings. There the old fellow would sit, always in the first row, with Anna by his side, and, do what he would, John could not escape the fascination of his eyes.

Sometimes he felt almost as though it were the Prince speaking and not he. He would take a dose of the strange drug before going to the meeting, and instantly would seem to lose his own individuality and assume that of another. A gift of unwonted eloquence possessed him at such times. Words came as upon a freshet of inspiration, and his audience was held spell-bound.

Yet he knew that the credit of it did not belong to him, but to that strange being from Dalmatia whose history none could tell.

'Thou art a changed man, John,' said an old fellow from Bradford he met one day in Oxford Street. 'By gosh, but we are proud of thee! Ay, lad, but thou'lt be i' the Cabinet yet—danged if thou won't.'

John made an evasive answer and turned aside into a picture gallery, where he read that there was a wonderful portrait of Clemenceau, the Tiger of Paris.

He knew nothing of French politics, and, despite the war, had very little knowledge of the great patriot who had rendered his country such imperishable service.

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Now, however, he found himself regarding this picture with an inexplicable curiosity. Something impelled him to return to his rooms and to write an appeal to French and American sentiment which would establish the creed of universal peace and cast aside the shibboleths of the mere politicians. He knew not why such an idea should have come to him, but when he was about to leave the gallery he discovered of a sudden that Prince Otto was by his side, and that Anna, his daughter, was with him, though that was a fact which meant little to him.

‘You have been looking at the portrait of M. Clemenceau,’ said the Prince.

John admitted that he had come to the gallery for nothing else.

‘I can’t say just why,’ he replied, ‘but I saw the bill on the door and felt compelled to go in. You remember that we were talking about Clemenceau at your dinner-table last night?’

‘Yes,’ said the Prince, thoughtfully; and taking John’s arm, he led him up and down the long room, talking of nothing else but France and America and the psychology of those peoples.

‘You are wise to teach your people as you suggest, Mr. Macclesfield; afterwards you will come, perhaps, to speak of my country and the wrongs of my nation.’

‘Oh,’ said John, with a laugh, ‘I don’t know anything about that.’

‘But you will study and you will learn. Now I think we must look for Anna. I have promised to take her to Ciro’s for lunch.’

‘I believe you’ll be jazzing next,’ said John clumsily. ‘Here she is, looking at an old daub I wouldn’t give a fiver for.’

It was a portrait by Van Eyck, and it sold next day for seven thousand guineas. But John did not see that it was beautiful while Anna was looking at it.

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London talked for some days of little else but the article on Clemenceau. As a writer, John Macclesfield awoke to find himself famous. He had already made his mark as an orator, and now men said that he was also a thinker.

‘Ought to be at the Foreign Office,’ was the verdict of Bradford. It was plain that such brains could not long be kept out of the Cabinet.

This opinion became strengthened when people heard that there was to be a mighty meeting at the Albert Hall to discuss the question of the Nationalisation of Industry, and that the principal speakers were to be the Prime Minister and John Macclesfield. It was the chance of John’s life, said Bradford, and after what he had done already there seemed but little doubt that he would take it.

John himself had no doubt about it. He believed secretly that he had become a greater speaker than the Prime Minister, and his vanity refused to attribute his success entirely to Prince Otto. True, the Prince’s drug—that wonderful stuff in the green phial—was a tonic which seemed almost to work miracles upon occasion; but John argued that it was but a tonic after all, and that the gifts of intellect he now displayed surely were all his own.

‘The old boy has just given me good health,’ he would tell himself. ‘I don’t know what his medicine is, but it certainly does shake up a man’s brains—especially when he gives it to me himself and we have a bit of a talk afterwards. I must see that he comes along to the Albert Hall. I wouldn’t be the same without him—I want him near me when I’m speaking.’

The Prince himself declared that he was very willing to go.

‘Anna shall come with me,’ he said, ‘and you must see that we are seated in the front row. It is, as you say, the critical moment in your career. I want you to take a certain line of argument and to concentrate upon that during your preparation. If you succeed, you may be sure of a

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place in the Government, directly there is a vacancy.'

John thanked him and listened gratefully to the points which the Prince desired him to make. He had a week still in which to prepare for his great oration, and so deeply did his work engross him that he forgot all about the wonderful drug, and even began to think that the Prince himself might not be the best adviser where the politics were concerned. A proper conceit in his own powers now possessed him, so that he could say, 'I, John Macclesfield, will do this off my own bat.' Nevertheless, he was not a little distressed when he heard, some few days before the meeting, that his friend had fallen suddenly very ill and that a specialist had been sent for. John went round at once to the house in Charles Street and had the news from Anna herself.

'My father is very ill,' she said. There were tears in her eyes while she spoke. 'He would not know you if you saw him. It is pneumonia, they tell me. You would not recognise him, Mr. Macclesfield.'

He told her how very sorry he was—and, in truth, he had conceived a great affection for this noble old man, so wise, so kind, so much of a mystic whom the East had taught. And Anna of the red-gold hair—of course, he was concerned for her, wondering what would happen if her father died.

'You must let me do anything I can,' he said sympathetically enough. 'We must have the best advice. I will ask Sir Cyprian to call to-day. He is the best authority I know upon pneumonia. You have a good nurse, of course?'

'I am the nurse,' she said quietly; 'my father would have no other near him.'

John thought it rather foolish, and said the usual things about her strength being insufficient for the job and the need of rest; but as it was evident that she hardly heard him, he took his leave and returned to the Ritz Hotel.

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He did not know why it was, but an inexplicable anxiety concerning his speech at the Albert Hall now began to affect him. Foolish he knew it to be, yet he could not escape the idea that in some way Prince Otto was necessary to his success at the great meeting, and that, in the Prince's absence, he might fail to take due advantage of this supreme opportunity. He remembered how the white-haired old man used to sit in the front row of the stalls of any theatre or public building in which he, John, was to speak, and how the magnetism of his presence was incontestable. A superstitious person, indeed, would have said that the words came from the old man's lips and not from those of the apparent speaker. John, of course, was far too level-headed to believe anything of that kind.

For all that, the Prince's illness worried him greatly, and when, upon the night previous to the great meeting, he heard that he was dead, the shock quite paralysed his faculties for the time being.

In an access of fear amounting almost to panic, he be-thought him of the drug, and perceived with real apprehension that but little of the precious liquid remained in the bottle. When he measured out such a dose as the Prince had prescribed, he was disappointed to discover that the effect of the tonic was apparent no longer. It seemed to him now to have neither taste nor smell. Could it be that the magic of it had departed with the soul of the man who knew its secret—or had there been any true magic at all?

He was unable to answer the question. The critical hour of his career approached, and now he flinched from it in a way he had not believed possible.

The story of John Macclesfield's disappearance as a politician is well known. There never was a beginning so favourable, an end so ignominious.

He himself could give no good account of it to anybody. He had gone to the great meeting determined to make for

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himself a name which should 'echo down the ages'. In effect he had stumbled through ten minutes of incoherence, and had left a mighty audience asking why such a fool had been asked to speak in such a place.

It really was incomprehensible that a man could pass so swiftly from the sublime to the ridiculous. John could not imagine what had happened to him. There he stood on the platform groping for words as a man may grope for matches in the dark.

The troubled eyes sought one face, and, failing to find it, the man became as a child that is lost in a great city. His whole soul desired the presence of the dead Otto, and a prayer was wrung from his lips that his friend would speak to him even in death. But a great silence fell in the place, and it was the pity of the living and not of the dead which sought to help him.

'Speak up, lad!' cried his friends from Bradford. They felt now that their city was put to shame by him as formerly it had been honoured.

So he passed finally from the light of politics, and went back to the world he had known. Nothing was said about him in the papers, but men, he knew, were saying much. He resigned all pretensions to Parliamentary honour, and fell into his old business habits, coming to London every month and staying for a few nights at the Ritz Hotel.

It was upon one of these occasions, six months after Prince Otto's death, that he happened to remember the brain drug and to reflect upon his folly. What an imposture it had been! Yet was it wholly an imposture?

He sat by the window of his room overlooking the Park, and, as he sat, he still held the phial in his hand. But one or two drops of the precious drug remained; yet they seemed to him very beautiful in colour, and in their turn they gave a radiance to the life round about him which had been so sombre for him these many months.

And now, just as it had happened on that ever memor-

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able night when the Prince first gave him the phial, he saw a vision, and it moved him strangely. It was as though somebody unseen bade him go out into the streets of the city and there seek a destiny yet unrevealed.

He laughed at the idea, but the night being fine and the summer not wholly passed, he put on his hat presently and walked across the Green Park towards Victoria Station, wondering perhaps at his course but yet impelled to take it. Indeed, some hand invisible might have been guiding him, so sure was his step; and when, upon the pavement near Westminster Cathedral, he saw Anna Metkovitch, the meeting did not occur to him to be anything but the most accidental thing in the world.

Anna was dressed shabbily in black, and she did not see John. He, however, made up his mind to speak to her, and he followed her through the thronged streets, telling himself that it was an odd place in which to find the daughter of a supposed millionaire. He knew nothing of Prince Otto's fortune being lost irretrievably in the crash which had overtaken the Balkan States; and he supposed that the tales of the dead man's wealth were true.

Such credulity stimulated his wonder when Anna entered a block of miserable flats in which live the very poor of Westminster and climbed the stairs to an attic which should hide her poverty.

'Good God,' said John, 'she can't live here!'

He did not know what to do, and for quite a long while he stood before the door irresolute and almost afraid.

That he neither knocked nor rang he has always affirmed stoutly.

'I was just standing there,' he will tell his friends, 'when there came to me the vision of the dead man, Otto, and he seemed to touch the door, and it flew wide open. Anna was standing inside, a candlestick in her hand, and she looked up at me with frightened eyes. "Mr. Macclesfield!" she cried.'

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But plain John usually breaks off the narration at this point. He had seen Anna Metkovitch for the first time that night. We agree with his friends that he must have been a fool and blind heretofore.

BY
EDEN PHILLPOTTS



THE MATCHMAKER

I **BAN'T** the sort to offer my opinion till 'tis axed for, an' anybody in this village will tell you the same. A very cautious old woman, an' well I may be, for I've seen an' felt the rough edge of life more'm most people, an' I've met with an amazin' scant share of gratitude for all my well-doing. An' yet, to say it without pride, there's a good few scattered up an' down 'pon Dartymoor as never knowed their happiness till they met me.

Old George Pearn put the case in a nutshell last time he axed me to marry him.

'No,' he said, 'though you never had no use for holy matrimony yourself, 'tis something wonnerful the folk you've led into it.'

'Tis true,' I said, 'an', what's more, nine out of ten of 'em bless the day.'

'No doubt,' he answered me, 'an' I wish to God as you'd taste it yourself, for 'tis a cruel thing to see a comely woman like you—as don't look an hour more'n sixty still—biding here all alone wi'out a man.'

But George Pearn was a creature of habit, if you understand me, an' one of his habits was to ax me to marry him every autumn. He'd done it since he was a widower, an' that was fifteen year before the matter of young Will Heathman an' Susan Crocker.

I often wondered what George Pearn would have said

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if I'd up an' taken him. No doubt he'd have felt much surprised an' annoyed about it. But he owed me a something, no doubt, for I married his darter—a very vinegary piece of goods, as weren't for many markets, an' was up home forty year old afore I found the right party for her. A dustman he was, hard of hearing, an' short of an eye—in fact, made for her, you might say. For she had the pleasure of talking, which was to her what spirits is to many a female; an' he had the blessing of not hearing; so they never had no trouble to name, an' often said 'twas a good day's work when they comed to drink tea with me one Lord's Day an' went to chapel together after.

There was Luke Westley too, an' poor Matthew Yelland as got killed in the river, an' many others I could tell you about; an', to be fair, I might also name that anointed ruffian Joshua Pike, who knocked his wife's head-bones in, an' would have knocked in mine if he'd met me that afternoon. He *could* hear; an' poor Sarah looked to it that he did hear. But the ugly truth, morning, noon an' night for five years, got on his nerves at last; an' he laid her out wi' a coal-hammer, as many a nagging woman have been laid out afore her. I could also mention another man here an' there who had no luck with his wife; but 'tis better not to name names.

Though an old maid myself, there ban't much about the men folk I don't know; an' having a score of nephews an' nieces, I'm also pretty well versed in childer an' their ways. In fact, as Mr. Pearn puts it in his free fashion, I'm a mother in all but the name an' the pangs. Not that childern like me. To be candid, they never do. I was asking my sister-in-law the reason—she being a twin-bearer an' a milky, cow-like soul as dotes on every babby that comes into Belstone, an' can't keep her hands off 'em. To see her turn down the flannel off a new-born babe's face wi' her little fat white hands! Looks a'most as if she could eat 'em—goes silly, like a mother cat wi' chets. But

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in answer to me she merely said I was too sharp at the joints.

' 'Tis like running against the edge of the furniture for the little dears to come to you, 'Tibby,' she said; an' I couldn't be vexed wi' her, for there was truth in it. Between me an' her it's the difference of a scrag o' mutton an' a suet dumpling.

Well, about Will an' Susan. 'Twas his mother axed me to have a dish o' tea along wi' her one afternoon; an' her being a widow an' well thought upon, an' butt-woman to the church, I went, knowing of course she wanted something out of me. Which, sure enough, she did.

'Miss Minifie,' she said, 'you know my son.'

'Him as works to Mr. Arscott's quarry?' I answered. An' I pursed up my lips a thought, no doubt.

'I see you do,' said the man's poor mother. 'His failings ban't a clever subject for the spinster ear, I allow; but all the same, it's not like talking to a girl—you with all your ripe wisdom an' with your great power at getting people into a marrying spirit.'

'Mary Heathman,' I answered her, 'if you want me to interest myself in William, say so. I know what he is: you can't shock me. His ways are pretty generally understood, for that matter.'

'Marriage might be the salvation of him.'

'Well, if what they tell be true, he's about it.'

'That's what's turning my hair grey,' she said, an' in her trouble the bread fell off her fork on the fire an' was spoiled.

'Get them slices toasted first an' tell about William after,' I advised her. 'You can't do two things at once.'

So she minded the tea, an' when we was at it, an' I'd poured my third cup in the saucer, I said:

'You don't want him to marry that girl, Jane Ball?'

'No, I do not. What mother would?' she asked. 'A touzled, slammocking, thing as spends half her time

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afore the looking-glass an' t'other half wasting money in Okehampton. Always in other people's shops when she did ought to be behind the counter in her father's.'

'She'm too pretty for a working chap's wife,' I told Mrs. Heathman.

'That sort trusts to their faces to fetch 'em husbands; but a beautiful face don't take the place of a well-cooked dinner longer than the honeymoon. How many pretty girls can cook?'

Of course Mrs. Heathman couldn't think of one.

'If there's to be happiness for that female, she must marry a shopkeeper,' I said—'a man of large ideas who'll even keep a servant for her.'

'An' the Lord help him,' said she, with feeling, 'whoever he is.'

She told a good deal more against Jane Ball, and I saw things was serious because she was so bitter. Then she named Susan Crocker, an' began to praise her in a way as would be fulsome for a heavenly angel. All the same, I knowed Susie was a very nice young woman, though sly. She belonged to the sort as goes their own way an' keep their mouths shut—a very great art, and commoner among women than men think. Susan was in service to the vicarage. She sang in the choir Sundays an' had her followers; but they was chaps from Zeal an' Sourton—not Belstone. I knowed all about 'em.

'There's a good few after her,' I told Mrs. Heathman, 'but nothing's done. It might be brought about, no doubt.'

'He'd come into the shadow of the vicarage then, an' parson would very likely get hold of him,' said the poor mother hopefully.

'It might be. I'll do what I can,' I promised. Then I axed a question:

'How do they stand to one another?'

'Very friendly indeed,' she told me. If only you can

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shake him off that yellow-haired toad of a girl, Jane, 'tis just as likely he'll turn to Susan as not.'

'Turn somewhere he certainly will,' I said, 'for he'm built of the sort of mud that can't go far without a woman to moon after.'

'Like his father,' said Mary Heathman. 'My late husband had large ideas, an' would have turned a Turk for certain if he hadn't been a Christian and married to a watchful woman.'

So we left it at that, an' I set to work the very next week by axing Mrs. Heathman an' her son to come in an' see some photographs of foreign parts as I'd had from a sailor nephew. An' I got Susan Crocker too, though I had to make a favour of it. Girls was shy of me owing to my reputation. Not but what a homely maiden or two have comed to me on the quiet before now for the very same reason. But never a penny did I make in my life by it, except the five-pound note Saul Barkell left me sarcastic in his will, for shortening his miserable life by marrying him to Charity Grepe, an' making him cease to have any fear of death, but a great longing to go instead. He didn't mean it kindly; but five pound is five pound, whether 'tis left in a proper or an improper spirit; an' 'twas as useful as any other five I've ever come by.

Mary Heathman arrived first, an' said that William was on the way. Presently in comed my gentleman, strolling along as if time was eternity. He'd got his Sunday black on, an' must needs begin playing my harmonium, which not a hand had touched for years, being a gift to me when Mrs. Morris died and having no knowledge of it myself.

'Don't you do that, Will,' I said, 'for 'tis a kicklish thing an' rough fingers may put the works out of order.'

'They be out of order,' he said. ' 'Tis more like a roaring hoss than a musical instrument.'

With that he played 'Rock of Ages', an' the bellows

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broke, an' it ended in a cloud of dust an' a noise like a pig being sticked.

I was vexed about it through remembering poor Mrs. Morris, as had thought the world of it; but in justice to the young man, he weren't to blame, for we found that 'twas a hot-bed of vermin and the wood bored through an' through by worms.

We was clearing up, an' Will had just offered to get a wheelbarrow an' carry the thing out 'pon the village dust-heap, when Susan Crocker arrived in all her Sunday finery—a black-eyed girl with very little to say to company, but no difficulty when alone with one of the male sex. Red she wore—brick-colour with a touch of yellow an' some wonnerful imitation cherries in her hat you could most have eaten, being the very daps of real ones. A neat-built girl, as put me in mind of myself at her age.

I set 'em down together an' gived 'em my nephew's roll of photographs, an' kept the tail of my eye on 'em while I talked to Mary Heathman.

Nought happed for a long while; then Will set up a great laugh an' 'peared to be much amused—why for I couldn't think, because though pictures of palm trees an' the heathen an' such like be very instructive to homedwellers, there'd naught to raise a laugh in 'em.

'What's the fun?' I asks William, and he says:

'This here photograph of your nephew, Sam Minifie, miss.'

'There ain't no photograph of Sam among 'em,' I answered.

'Oh yes, there is,' he said. 'I mind Sam very well. We was friends afore he runned away to sea. Put on your glasses an' have a look.'

I marked that Susie Crocker had gone a trifle red, though I thought 'twas only along of so much laughing.

Well, there was a picture, sure enough, that I had missed altogether, owing to it having got stuck to another

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of a missionary church, though a very different subject. 'Twas my favourite nephew, my own brother's boy, sitting between two ink-black females wi' an arm around each of their waists! All three was grinning an' showing enough teeth to set up a dentist's shop.

'Do make me wish I was a sailor-man myself,' said that 'dashus Will Heathman.

For my part I felt the blood of shame burn my cheek, and I gasped.

'He never meant to send that,' I said. 'It got stuck to the missionary picture—an' time there was missionaries there by the look of it!'

With that I tore the disgraceful thing in half an' put it on the fire.

'All the same, it do make me wish to go for a sailor,' said that dissolute young youth.

An' then Susie spoke—in her sly, dreamy way, as if she was only thinking to herself out aloud:

'I suppose English girls have got waists too, if it comes to that.'

An' her from the vicarage!

Of course 'twas the man who answered.

'Yes, they have,' he said, 'but you can't put your arms around two of 'em to once. That's the beauty of the tropics seemingly.'

An' then I changed the conversation.

In five or six minutes the tea ended, for I'd forgotten the young man's appetite, an' the crumpets was gone afore me an' his mother had settled to the table.

'Twas my plan to let him an' Mrs. Heathman take their leave first. Then I had a talk with Susan, an' found her to be a very sensible girl an' not flighty at heart. In fact, she knowed which side her bread was buttered very well and wanted to be married as soon as might be.

I said:

'Have you ever thought of Will Heathman?'

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An' she said:

'Just as often as he've thought of me.'

And I asked how often that might be; and she said:

'Not once.'

Then I began my work an' told her that in my judgment he was the right sort an' a good wage-earner, an' only wanted a sensible wife to find himself foreman at Arscott's quarry and a rising man.

An' she said:

'There's others, however.'

'If you mean they Zeal fellows,' I answered, 'an' especially Maddaford or Charlie Cousins, you'll be wise to think twice. It don't do for Belstone girls to marry foreigners, as I've always said.'

'Charlie Cousins be getting three-an'-twenty shillings a week, whether or no,' she answered. 'I've not heard that Heathman makes more'n a pound.'

But I explained how Charlie, who was a gardener, might lose his job or have to take less any day, especially as his master, a retired Army gentleman, was known to be saddled with a lot of grandchildren, owing to his only daughter's husband dying uninsured in India.

'He could get as good a job again,' she said.

'Don't do nothing in a hurry, my dear,' I told her; an' then she went off.

I saw her twice after that, an' the man once. Him I met alone coming up through the valley from Okehampton. He overtook me an' carried my parcels for me, as a young man should. But not till I'd axed him to do it. He was down in the mouth about the yellow-haired girl, Jane Ball, an' said 'twas a hell of a world, an' other violent, one-sided things. But I let him run on, an' agreed with him where I could, an' got in a few words about Susie Crocker.

'There's only one woman in the world for me, an' I'll make her father give her to me afore I've done,' he said.

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So that's how it stood at starting. Not a promising case exactly; but I'd had harder ones in my time, an' comed very well out of 'em. So, like the old fool I was, I went on with it.

A lot of thought I gave to the subject, but somehow there weren't any getting forwarder with 'em. He was always growling about Jane Ball, an' even went so far as to fight a man outside the White Hart Inn because the man said as Jane's teeth had begun life in another mouth. 'Twas an insult that Heathman couldn't put up with, an' he knocked the chap down (both being market-merry at the time) and left him in the kennel till his friends came an' took him home.

Jane got to hear about it, an' it warmed her heart to Heathman, so he seemed further off t'other girl than ever; an' I met Susie Crocker with her gardener twice on her evenings out. Altogether it looked as if they young people was going to have their own way against me.

I wish I'd taken it so and let 'em alone; but I'm the sort that hates to be bested, an' it seemed a silly thing for a couple scarcely counted twenty year apiece, to be cleverer than a woman of my years an' experience. So I took a rash step an' done what I'd done once afore in a similar case. It worked very well that time; an' I was hopeful it would again.

I spoke to the girl first when we comed out of church elbow to elbow one Sunday evening

'Have'e seen anything of Will Heathman lately?' I axed.

'Only in the distance,' she said.

'He's going out of his mind, I'm afeared,' I said, 'an' you'm the reason. No cause to shake your head. He'll make a hole in the river, my dear, an' the fault will be yours.'

'Never!' cried Susan.

''Tis so,' I told her. 'The least you can do is to hear him an' give him a little hope. If you'd but meet him part

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of the way—such a modest, hang-back soul as him.'

'Hadn't heard he was that sort,' she said.

'Well, let him see you, an' be gentle an' helpful. He's the very man for you. Meet him half way, I ax no more.'

Luckily she'd had a bit of a tiff with Charlie Cousins at the time, and made no objection to meeting Will.

'Remember the goodness and the prospects of the man,' I said; an' the very same night I went to the Heathmans' an' telled a bit there, an' then axed Will to see me back-along to the village, because their cottage was down past the Old Rectory Farm, in a lonesome part half a mile an' more from Belstone.

Of course he comed, and I spoke about Susie Crocker.

'She'll do what she said, sure as death be death,' I said, an' sighed very sorrowfully.

'An' what might that be?' he axed.

'Make an end of herself, poor maiden,' I answered him. But he shook his head.

'Only her cunning. She's after Charlie Cousins. She don't care a farden damn for me,' he answered.

'Into the water she'll go for you,' I told him, 'an' as a man, it becomes you to save her life an' take her. There's a good wife going begging in her,' I said. 'She've got a lofty nature, an' cooks so well as a professed cook, an' regular at church as parson's self, an' saved a bit of money too.'

'How much?' he axed, waking up a trifle; but I told him I didn't know.

He said naught for a while, and I heard afterwards that the day before he'd had a proper row with Jane because she caught him beside the river with one of the girls from the laundry.

'I don't want nobody to make away with herself on my account, God knows,' said young Heathman. All the same, he looked rather pleased about it—such is the conceit of men.

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'Take her,' I said; 'a better wife no chap ever yet had. Propose, an' if she's too flustered to say "yes", *make* her say it.'

'As to that, I must think upon it. Anyway I'll see the poor woman,' he promised.

Then I left him. 'Twas a clear going from the truth and doing evil that good might come, no doubt. I didn't feel too easy about it, for I've got a conscience. But this same trick had worked so amazing well in the case of just such another pair of young people two years earlier, that I believed myself justified.

Not that I was happy. In fact, I had a fore-token of evil by a dream the very same night. An' inside a week the dream comed true. Nobody was ever punished for wrong-doing quicker'n me. 'Twas a sorry come-along-o't for a woman of my years, an' many a tear scalded my cheeks in secret after.

The tragedy falled out in a very coorious way indeed, for the last thing likely was that I should hear with my own ears the result of my bit o' work; but I did. In fact, I sat within three yards of them two souls when they comed together full of what I'd told 'em; an' though I've met with a deal of conversation in my life an' listened to love talk, like any other woman, in my springtime, never did I hear anything like Susan and William a-telling upon Belstone Tor.

For there, on a day in late August, the thing comed to its horrid conclusion. I was up-along wi' a party or two 'hurting', as we call it; that is, gathering the whortle-berries that grow abundant 'pon the west of they rocks. An' as I picked an' picked, an' reckoned I'd made very near a shilling an' sixpence by my work, who should I see passing along but young Heathman an' Susie Crocker? He was just away from the quarry, an' she had evidently met him by appointment out 'pon the Moor. They headed straight for me, an' first I thought as they'd

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actually seed me an' was coming along for that reason. Then I went aquatt, like a hare in her form, hoping as they'd pass wi'out seeing me. But, instead, if they didn't pitch ten feet off on a gert slab of granite! I ought to have got up an' bade 'em good evening an' gone on my way; but I didn't. Curiosity never dies in a woman. For my dear life I couldn't move. And, of course, after I'd listened two minutes, 'twas too late. She beganned it in her honey-soft voice:

' 'Twas kind of you to meet me, William.'

'Not at all—very pleased, I'm sure,' he said. 'I'd do anything for you—in reason.'

'An' I for you—in reason—William.'

'That's as it should be.'

Then they hanged fire a lot, for each thought the other was sore smitten, an' neither knowed exactly how to start.

'Of course there's as good fish in the sea as ever comed out of it, you must know, Susan,' said young William suddenly.

'I'm very glad 'tis so, and that you know it,' she answered. 'Certainly there be—an' no maiden's so good but you can't find a better.'

' 'Tis hard when a chap—I mean when a girl—when anybody, in fact—be very much set on any other body. 'Tis dreadful hard—but still there's many quite as good men as me in the world, Susan, an' many would make a better husband than what I should.'

Susie Crocker seemed a thought surprised at this. 'Twasn't what she expected from a man as meant to drown hissself for her.

For my part I was sorry that Will had taken that line. Something told me I'd failed.

'Not but what you're a very good man and would make any woman happy,' said Susan cautiously.

'No, I wouldn't,' he said. 'You mustn't think that,

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Susan. You mustn't think I'm half the man you suppose. I'll be frank with you—for my peace of mind as well as yours. I never have looked much at dark women. I can't help it, but I never have. My nature don't yearn to 'em.'

'An' 'tis a coorious thing, William,' she said quick as lightning, 'that I've always had a sort of bias against fair men. They don't fill my eye.'

He started at that, being as smooth and sandy-headed a soul as ever waited and hoped against hope for a beard. He gave a sniff of wonder, and then another silence falled between them. For my part, I began to wish myself further. Then Will went off again:

' 'Tis strange, Susan, that being against a fair face, you feel so kind to me. But you must fight it, because if you have that feeling against my sort o' colour, you'd never be happy with me for long.'

'My stars, you do astonish one!' she burst out. 'Why, my good man, do'e call this courting? Who on earth would think now that you cared a brass farthing for me?'

'You mustn't say that. I like you very well and I want to see you happy an' married.'

'So I want to see myself.'

'But, in sober honesty, Susie, you must try an' understand that I'm not the man for you. 'Twould be cruel kindness to pretend different.'

'Since when did you find that out?' she axed with a voice full o' wonder.

'It have always been my opinion,' he answered.

'Well, in sober honesty—though, if I didn't know, I should think "sober" weren't the word—in sober honesty, I never thought you *was* the man.'

'The dowl you didn't! Then why for——?'

He broke off, an' though the day was warm, I went gooseflesh down the spine. 'Twas one of my failures, no doubt, an' I'd have given a golden sovereign to be ten mile off at that moment.

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'Did the feeling against me come over your mind sudden?' he axed her.

'I haven't got no feeling against you, Will. I'm just neither one way nor t'other toward you—except the general dislike of your pink and white.'

' 'Tis just the same here! As for being in love with you, Susie, to say it polite, I never was—not a twinkle. Jane Ball——' He stopped an' sighed, like a cow breathing.

'This is very wonnerful,' she said. 'I begin to see how things are. An' as a self-respecting woman, William, I must tell you that while I thought you a very nice young man, I never hankered after you as—as you seem to think.'

'I didn't think it,' he said, 'I was told it.'

The stones an' berry-bushes got dancing in my old eyes then. I felt my bones give under me, an' if I could have crawled in a rabbit-hole, I would have done so.

'An' me too,' she answered him. 'They said that if I didn't have you, you'd make a hole in the river!'

'The things that happen!' he cried.

' 'Twas Tibby Minifie told me.'

'An' what d'you think she told me?' he axed, an' answered himself in a breath. 'She said you was dying for me, an' that if I didn't take you, you'd drown yourself without a doubt.'

'Oh, the wickedness!' cried Susie Crocker.

'She've over-reached herself this journey—bad old baggage. Ban't for nothing she'm called "the match-maker",'

' 'Tis a great weight off my mind,' the girl said.

'An' mine,' he admitted. 'We shouldn't have suited each other at all.'

'Not a bit in the world. You'll make a very good husband—for Jane Ball; but not for me.'

'Exactly so,' he answered. ' 'Tis my one hope an' prayer to get her father round. An' as for you, the sense

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you've got be something amazing for a woman. An' I do hope you'll be happy along with Charles Cousins. He's a very good fellow in his way, an' known to me; an' he's a saving man an' a Bible Christian from his youth up, if he tells truth. I ban't any of these var-tuous things.'

'I'm glad you like him,' she said; 'an', for that matter, I like Jane Ball.'

'Do you know her father?'

'Yes; the vicarage deals there.'

'Fancy that! Well, if you can say a word for me——'

'I will next time the old man serves me. He's friendly to me—old Ball is. I'll tell him what a good, hard-working chap you are.'

'An' tell him I keep my mother.'

'Yes, I will.'

'An that I'd sign the pledge to-morrow if 'twould give him any satisfaction.'

'I will do so.'

'I can't help you no ways?'

'No, thank you, Will. As a matter of fact, me an' Cousins be tokened. Don't you mention it; but if he gets his rise come Easter, we'm going to be married.'

'Lucky devil—I mean him,' said young Heathman.

'There's nothing more to be said, then—except the name of Tibby Minifie?'

The man would have forgived me, I do believe; but evidently the woman didn't mean to.

'Her ought to be ducked in the pond,' said William. 'Dang the old witch—for she's no better.'

'She ought to be proclaimed,' said Susan with a horrid cold tone of voice. 'Come what may, she shall hear what I think of it.'

'Better drop the old liar. She ban't fit company for truth-telling folk,' he said.

'Twas almost too much. Humped up though I was, an'

aching in the joints, an' swimming in the head, I felt my temper rise.

'Upon the whole,' he said, 'you'd better leave her to me. She wants a man to talk to her.'

'If you do, I hope you'll let her have it straight, then,' cried that indecent girl. 'She's made fools of us—or tried to.'

''Twas done to please my mother,' he answered; 'an' that being so, one can't say very much to her. Besides, I never would use language to a woman; I've got my pride like other people. I shall call her a damned old meddlesome cat, as ought to be shot an' nailed up on a barn door—not a word beyond that. 'Twill shame her a sight more if I be quiet an' dignified like.'

Susan seemed disappointed, but for my part, even in my indignation, I couldn't help wondering what the man called 'language'.

Anyway, I done a bold thing, for I couldn't hold in no more, so up I jumped, an' faced 'em both, an' said:

'A meddlesome cat be I? an' that's all the thanks you graceless hard-hearted brats give me for striving an' plotting to bring happiness into your lives! You ought to blush to your boots, both of you, to dare to talk of an old woman in that beastly way! I'm 'shamed of 'e, an' I've a good mind to tell the countryside what a pair you be!'

'That's all jolly fine,' he said. 'But how about your lies?'

'Lies or no lies,' I told him, 'I haven't got to answer for 'em to you. I meant well by the pair of you. I thought you'd make a couple so happy as you be handsome; my sole thought was to bring you together in a marrying spirit, an' though I may have failed to do it, owing to you both being set elsewhere, that's no fault of mine, an' to call me a meddlesome cat, ban't right or fair. So now then!'

'Us certainly didn't look at it like that,' said Will, who was a weak man behind his bluster.

'An' whether or no, 'twas a very dangerous step to take,'

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declared Susan. 'I'm sure you know that, Miss Minifie.'

'Ban't I punished enough?' I asked. 'Ban't it bad enough for me to find I've failed, without making this set against me? You should judge me by my good feelings an' high intentions an' wishes for your happiness here and hereafter. You ought to go on your knees and ax my pardon for such cowardly cruelty to an old woman as don't feel nought to you but kindness.'

'Of course, if you put it like that——' began the man, with repentance coming over him.

'There's no other way to put it,' I said.

Then I talked to 'em pretty strong, an' at last they both caved in, an' saw that I'd meant terrible well to 'em, an' ended by begging my pardon an' carrying my basket home.

Then having conquered 'em, I stretched a point myself.

'Least said, soonest mended,' I told 'em. 'There ban't no good telling the parish about this. I meant well, but I was wrong to try and influence two clever people like what you be. I ought to have knowed you was both wise enough to get married without any help from me, an' I'm sorry I took you in hand. Nobody can say more than that.'

So there it ended, though the man's mother, of course, blamed me bitterly, as mothers will if you try to do them a turn with their offspring an' fail. But when Jane Ball did take Heathman, an' her father died, an' young Heathman actually rose to the shop, an' became a grocer, an' got four childern, an' she turned out as good a mother as any woman need desire to be—then Mrs. Heathman grudgingly forgave me; an' declared that 'twas better after all to trust to Providence. In a nasty tone of voice she put it, being as much to say that I'd tried to take over Providence's work an' messed it up.

Susie took her gardener also; an' that strangely enough turned out well too, as far as one could see. 'Twas the

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very uncommon case of four young people having their own way an' not coming to grief as a consequence. At least, so George Pearn said, last time he axed me to take him.

BY
' SAPPER '



THE PATCH ON THE QUILT

‘THE trouble in my game,’ began the Actor, ‘is that the greatest plays can never be staged. There would be no money in them. The public demand a plot—a climax: after that the puppets cease strutting, the curtain rings down. But in life—in real life—there’s no plot. It’s just a series of anti-climaxes strung together like a patchwork quilt, until there comes the greatest anti-climax of all and the quilt is finished.’

He passed his hand through his fast-greying hair, and stared for a moment or two at the fire. The Soldier was filling his pipe; the Writer, his legs stretched in front of him, had his hands thrust deep in his trouser pockets.

‘It’s one of the patches in one of the quilts that my story is about,’ continued the actor thoughtfully. ‘Just an episode in the life of a woman—or shall I say, just the life of a woman in an episode?’

‘You remember that play of mine—“John Pendlesham’s Wife”?’ He turned to the Barrister, who nodded.

‘Very well,’ he answered. ‘Molly Travers was your leading lady.’

‘I was out of England,’ said the Soldier. ‘Never saw it.’

‘It’s immaterial.’ The Actor lit a cigarette. ‘The play itself has nothing to do with my story, except indirectly. But as you didn’t see it, I will just explain this much. I, of

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course, was John Pendlesham—Molly was my wife, and the third act constituted what, in my opinion, was the finest piece of emotional acting which that consummate actress has ever done in her career.'

The Writer nodded. 'I agree. She was superb.'

'Night after night the fall of the curtain found her nearly fainting; night after night there was that breathless moment of utter silence followed by a perfect crash of applause. I am mentioning these old facts because her marvellous performance does concern my story directly—even though the play does not.

'We had been running about a month, I suppose, when my story begins. I had just come off after the third act, and was going to my dressing-room. For some reason, instead of going by the direct door which led into it from the stage, I went outside into the passage. There were some hands moving furniture or something. . . .

'I think you've all of you been behind at my theatre. First you come to the swing doors out of the street, inside which the watch dog sits demanding callers' business. Then there is another door, and beyond that there are three steps down to my room. And it was just as I was opening my door on that night that I happened to look round.

'Standing at the top of the three stairs was a woman who was staring at me. I only saw her for a moment: then the watch dog intervened, and I went into my room. But I *had* seen her for a moment: I had seen her for long enough to get the look in her eyes.

'We get all sorts and conditions of people behind, as you'd expect—stage-struck girls, actors out of a shop, autograph hunters, beggars. And the watch dog knew my invariable rule: only personal friends and people who had made an appointment by letter were allowed inside the second door. But a rule cannot legislate for every case.

'Gad! you fellows, it's many years now since that night, but I can still feel, as clearly as if it were yesterday, the

message in that girl's eyes. There had been hope and fear and pitiful entreaty: the look of one who had staked everything on a last desperate throw: the look of a mother who is fighting for her child. It was amazing: I couldn't understand it. As I stood just inside my door I couldn't have told you whether she was old or young, plain or pretty. And yet in that one fleeting second this vivid, jumbled message had reached me.'

The Actor pressed out his cigarette, and there was silence while he lit another one.

'For a moment I hesitated,' he continued after a while; 'then I rang the bell for the watch dog.

' "Who is that lady I saw outside there?" I asked, as he came in.

' "Won't give no name, sir," he answered. "Wants to see you, but I told her the rules."

'Once again I hesitated; probably I'd exaggerated—put a totally false construction on her expression, probably she was looking for a job like the rest of them. And then I knew that I'd got to see that woman, and that I should have no peace of mind until I'd heard what she had to say. The watch dog was regarding me curiously; plainly he could see no reason whatever for my hesitation. He was a matter-of-fact fellow, was the guardian of the door.

' "Show her in, I'll see her now." I had my back to him, but I could feel his virtuous indignation. After all, rules are rules.

' "Now, sir?" he echoed.

' "Now; at once."

'He went out, and I heard him go up the steps.

' "Mr. Trayne will see you. Come this way."

'And then the door opened again, and I turned to face the woman. She was young—quite young, dressed in a kind of cheap suburban frock. Her shoes had been good ones—once, now—well, however skilfully a patch is put on it is still a patch. Her gloves showed traces of much needle

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and cotton; the little bag she carried was rubbed and frayed. And over the cheap suburban frock she had on a coat which was worn and threadbare.

“It was good of you to see me, Mr. Trayne.”

“She was nervous and her voice shook a little, but she faced me quite steadily.

“It’s a very unusual thing for me to do,” I said. “But I saw you at the top of the stairs, and . . .”

“I know it’s unusual,” she interrupted. “The man outside there told me your rule. But believe me”—she was talking with more assurance now—“my reason for coming to see you is very unusual also.”

“I pulled up a chair for her. “What is your reason?” I asked.

“She took a deep breath and began fumbling with her handkerchief.

“I know you will think me mad,” she began, “but I don’t want to tell you my reason now. I want to wait until after the play is over, and I know you go on at once in the fourth act.”

“You’ve seen the play, then?” I remarked.

“I’ve seen the play,” was her somewhat astonishing answer, “every night since the first.”

“Every night!” I stared at her in surprise. “But . . .”

“I must have glanced at her clothes or something and she saw what was in my mind.

“I suppose you think that I hardly look as if I could afford such luxuries.” She smiled faintly. “I’ve only seen it from the gallery and pit, you know. And even that has meant that I’ve had to go without lunch. But—you see—it was necessary for me to see it: I had to. It was part of my plan—a necessary part.”

“I don’t want to seem dense,” I said gently, “but I’m afraid I don’t quite follow. How can seeing my play thirty odd times be a necessary part of your plan?”

“That’s what I don’t want to tell you now,” she re-

peated, and once more her hands began twisting nervously. “I want to wait till afterwards, when perhaps you’ll—of your kindness—do as I ask you. Oh! Mr. Trayne—for God’s sake, don’t fail me!” She leant forward beseechingly in her chair.

“My dear child,” I answered quietly—I don’t think she can have been much more than twenty, “you haven’t told me yet what you want me to do.”

“I want you to come to a house in Kensington with me,” she said steadily.

Once again the Actor paused, and stared at the fire. Then he gave a short laugh.

“When she said that, I looked at her pretty sharply. Without appearing conceited or anything of that sort, one has occasionally in the course of one’s career, received certain flattering attentions from charming women—attentions which—er—one is tempted to conceal from one’s wife.”

‘Precisely,’ murmured the Ordinary Man. ‘Precisely.’

‘And for a moment, I must confess that the thought passed through my mind that this was one of those occasions. And it wasn’t until the colour rose to her face and stained it scarlet, that I realised that not only had I made a mistake, but that I had been foolish enough to let her see that I had.’

“My God!” she whispered, “you don’t think—you couldn’t think—that I meant . . .”

‘She rose and almost cowered away from me. “Why, I’m married.”’

‘I refrained from remarking that the fact was hardly such a conclusive proof of the absurdity of my unspoken thought as she seemed to imagine. I merely bowed, and said a little formally: “Please don’t jump to conclusions. May I ask why you wish me to come to a house in Kensington with you?”’

‘The colour ebbed away from her cheeks, and she sat down again.’

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“That’s the very thing I don’t want to tell you, until you come,” she answered very low. “I know it sounds absurd—it must do, it seems as if I were being unnecessarily mysterious. But I can’t tell you, Mr. Trayne, I can’t tell you . . . Not yet. . . .”

‘And then the call boy knocked, and I had to go on for the last act. In a way I suppose it was absurd of me—but life is made up of impulses. I confess that the whole thing intrigued me. When a woman comes and tells you that she has seen your play every night since it started; that she’s had to go without her lunch to do so; that it was a necessary part of some wonderful plan, and that she wants you to go to a house in Kensington, the least curious man would be attracted. And from my earliest infancy I’ve always been engrossed in other people’s business.

“All right,” I said briefly. “I’ll come with you.”

‘And then I had to put out my hand to steady her, I thought she was going to faint. Reaction, I thought at the time; later, it struck me that the reason was much more prosaic—lack of food.

‘I stopped for a moment till she seemed herself again; then I told her to wait outside.

“I shall be about half an hour,” I said, “and then we’ll take a taxi, and go down to Kensington. Tell them to give you a chair. . . .”

‘And my last impression as I went on to the stage was of a white-faced girl clutching the table, staring at me with great brown eyes that held in them a dawning triumph.

‘I think,’ went on the Actor thoughtfully, ‘that that is where the tragedy of it all really lay. Afterwards she told me that the part of her plan which had seemed most difficult to her was getting my consent to go with her to Kensington. Once that was done, she knew all would be well, she was absolutely and supremely confident. And when I went on to the stage for the fourth act, she felt that success had crowned her efforts, that what was to come

after was nothing compared to that which she had already done. The inaccessible stronghold had been stormed, the ogre had proved to be a lamb.

‘Well, we went to Kensington. I sent my own car home, and we took a taxi. During the drive she was very silent, and I didn’t try to make her talk. Evidently no inkling of the mysterious plan was to be revealed until we arrived at the address she had given the driver. It was some obscure street that I had never heard of and the name of which I have completely forgotten. I know it was somewhere not far from Barker’s.

‘The door was opened by a repulsive-looking woman who peered at me suspiciously. And then the girl took her on one side and whispered something in her ear. Apparently it had the desired effect, as the Gorgon retired grumbling to an odoriferous basement, leaving us alone in the hall.

‘When she had shut the door the girl turned to me.

‘“Will you come upstairs, Mr. Trayne. I want you to meet my husband.”

‘I bowed. “Certainly,” I said, and she led the way.

‘“So the husband is in the plan,” I reflected as I followed her. Was he a genius with a play that he proposed to read to me? I had suffered from the plays of genius before. Or was he some actor down on his luck? If so, why all the mystery? And then, when I’d made up my mind that it was a mere begging case, we arrived at the room. Just before she turned the handle of the door she again looked at me.

‘“My husband is ill, Mr. Trayne. You’ll excuse his being in bed.”

‘Then we went in. Good Lord! you fellows,’ the Actor leant forward in his chair. ‘I’ve been pretty hard up in the old days, but as I stood inside that door I realised for the first time what poverty—real poverty—meant. Mark you, the girl was a lady; the weak, cadaverous-looking fellow

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propped up in bed with a tattered shawl round his shoulders was a gentleman. And beyond the bed, and one chair, and a rickety old chest-of-drawers there wasn't a stick of furniture in the room. There was a curtain in the corner with what looked like a washstand behind it, and a shelf by the bed with two cups and some plates on it. And nothing else except an appalling oleograph of Queen Victoria on the wall.

"This is Mr. Trayne, dear." She was bending over her husband, and after a moment he looked up at me.

"It was good of you to come, sir," he said. "Very good." And then he turned to his wife and I heard him say: "Have you told him yet, Kitty?"

"She shook her head. "Not yet, darling, I will now." She left his side and came over to me.

"Mr. Trayne, I know you thought me very peculiar at the theatre. But I was afraid that if I told you what I really wanted you'd have refused to come. You get hundreds and hundreds of people coming to see you who think they can act. Asking you to help them get a job and that sort of thing. Well, I was afraid that if I told you that that was what I wanted, you'd have told me to go away. Perhaps you'd have given me a straw of comfort—taken my address—said you'd let me know if anything turned up. But nothing would have turned up. . . . And you see, I was rather desperate."

"The big brown eyes were fixed on me pleadingly, and somehow I didn't feel quite as annoyed as I should have done at what was nothing more nor less than a blatant trick to appeal to my sympathy.

"Perhaps nothing would have turned up," I said gently, "but you must remember that to-day the stage is a hopelessly overstocked profession. There are hundreds of trained actors and actresses unable to obtain a job."

"I know that," she cried eagerly, "and that's why I—why I thought out this plan. I thought that if I could

really convince you that I could act above the average . . .”

“And she can, Mr. Trayne,” broke in her husband. “She’s good, I know it.”

“We must leave Mr. Trayne to be the judge of that, Harry,” she smiled. “You see,” she went on to me, “what I felt was that there is an opening for real talent. There is, isn’t there?”

“Yes,” I agreed slowly. “There is an opening for *real* talent. But even that is a small one. . . . Have you ever acted before?”

“A little. In amateur theatricals!”

I turned away. Amateur theatricals! More heart-burning and disappointment has been caused by those abominable entertainments than their misguided originators will ever realise.

“But don’t think I’m relying on that.” The girl was speaking again, and I almost laughed. “I want you to judge me to-night.”

I swung round and looked at her. So this was the mysterious plan: I was to witness an impromptu performance, which was to convince me that the second Sarah Bernhardt had been discovered.

“I couldn’t have shown you, you see, in your dressing-room. I shouldn’t have had time. That’s why I asked you to come here.”

“You have the courage of your convictions anyway,” I said quietly. “I am perfectly ready to be convinced.”

“Then will you sit there.” She took off her hat and coat as I sat down on the only available chair, and from underneath his pillow the man produced a paper-covered book.

“You’ll forgive me if I read my lines, Mr. Trayne,” he said. “I find I can’t learn them—I can’t concentrate.” He passed a thin, emaciated hand over his forehead. “And it’s her you want to see.”

He turned over the pages weakly; then he began to read. And I—I sat up as if I’d been stung. At last every-

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thing was clear: the continual visits to the theatre—everything. The part of all others which they had selected to prove her ability, was the love-scene between Molly Travers and myself in the third act of “John Pendlesham’s Wife. . . .”

For a while there was silence, while the Actor thoughtfully lit another cigarette.

‘This unknown child,’ he went on after a moment, ‘who had acted a little in amateur theatricals, had deliberately challenged London’s greatest emotional actress in her most marvellous success before, Heaven help us, *me*—of all people. I suppose if I was writing a story I should say that she triumphed; that as I sat in that bare and hideous room I realised that before me was genius—a second and greater Molly; that from that moment her foot was set on the ladder of fame, and there was no looking back.’

The Actor laughed a little sadly. ‘Unfortunately, I’m not writing a story, I’m telling the truth. I don’t know how I sat through the next twenty minutes. It was the most ghastly caricature of Molly that I have ever thought of; the more ghastly because it was so intensely unintentional. Every little gesture was faithfully copied; every little trick and mannerism had been carefully learnt by heart. And this, as I say, to me who acted with that divine genius every night. God! it was awful. That marvellous line of Molly’s, when, standing in the centre of the stage facing me across the table, she said: “Then you don’t want me back?” that line which was made marvellous merely through the consummate restraint with which she said it, sounded from this poor child like a parlour-maid giving notice.

‘And then, at last it was over, and I realised I had to say something. They were both staring at me, hope shining clear in the girl’s eyes and pride in the man’s.

‘“She’s great, isn’t she, Mr. Trayne?” he said. “I’ve not had the privilege of seeing you and Miss Travers in the

part—but I feel that now—why,” he gave a little shaky laugh, “that it’s hardly necessary.”

‘You see,’ said the Actor slowly, ‘that was the devil of it all. They were both so utterly certain, especially the man. The difficulty had been to get me there; after that it had been easy. I glanced at the poor fellow in the bed, and his thoughts were plain to read. No more grinding poverty, no more unfurnished bed-sitting rooms, and—fame for the woman he loved. And then he spoke again.

“‘I’m such a hopeless crock, Mr. Trayne, and she’”—he took one of her hands in both his own—“she’s had to do all the work. Beastly, grinding work in an office, when she was capable of this.”

‘The girl bent over him, and I looked away. It seemed to me that the ground on which I stood was holy.’

The Actor gave a short laugh which deceived no one. ‘I suppose I was an ass,’ he went on, ‘but I’d do it again to-day. “It was wonderful,” I said, “quite wonderful.” And because I’m an actor they believed me. Not that he, at any rate, required much convincing—he only wanted his knowledge confirmed. Of course, when I spoke I didn’t realise what I was letting myself in for. I should have done, I suppose, but—I wasn’t left long in doubt. If she was wonderful—and had not I, Herbert Trayne, said so—what about a job? At once. . . . With my backing it was easy. . . . Which was all quite true except for the one vital fact of my having lied. But, hang it, you fellows!’ he exploded, ‘could you have told ’em it was the most appalling exhibition of utter futility you’d ever witnessed?’

‘No, I couldn’t,’ said the Soldier. ‘What happened?’

‘I can see them now,’ continued the Actor. ‘He was holding her hand, and looking up into her face—as a dog looks at the being it adores. And she was smiling a little, and crying a little—tears of pure joy. The strain was over, the lunches had not been missed in vain. And I stood there like a dumb idiot racking my brains for something to say.

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They thought I was wondering what job to offer her; they were right, I was.' The Actor laughed shortly.

'But I'd gone into the morass, and there was nothing for it but to blunder in deeper. The one vital essential was that in no circumstances must the poor child ever be allowed to act. The other was money—and at once. So I offered her then and there a job as Molly Travers's understudy at five pounds a week.'

'Great Scott!' The Doctor sat up with a jerk. 'Understudy Molly?'

'I explained, of course,' went on the Actor, 'that there was an understudy already, and that to save unpleasantness it would be better if she didn't come to the theatre, unless I sent for her. That, of course, it was more than likely that Miss Travers wouldn't be ill during the run of the play, and that in those circumstances I didn't want to offend the present understudy. And when another play came along, we must see what we could do. That, thank Heaven, I knew was some way off yet! It gave me breathing space.

'I gave her a week's salary in advance, and I got away—somehow. I think they were both a little dazed with the wonder of it, and they wanted to be alone. I heard his voice—weak and quavering—as I shut the door.

'“Oh! my very dear girl,” he was whispering—and she was on her knees beside the bed. And I blundered my way downstairs, cursing myself for a sentimental fool. There's whisky on the table, you fellows. Help yourselves.'

But no one moved, and the Actor lit another cigarette.

'I saw her occasionally during the next two or three months,' he continued, 'though I never went to their rooms again. They had moved—I knew that—because I used to post the cheque every week. But the few times I did see her, I gathered that her husband was not getting any better. And one day I insisted on Lawrence, the specialist, going to see him. I couldn't have one of my

company being worried, I told her, over things of that sort. I can see her face now as I said “one of my company”. I don’t know what Lawrence said to her, but he rang me up at the theatre that night, and he did not mince his words to me.

“I give him a month,” he said. “It’s galloping consumption.”

‘It was just about a month later that the thing happened which I had been dreading. Molly went down with ‘flu. Her understudy—the real one—was Violet Dorman, who was unknown then. And, of course it was her chance.’

‘One moment,’ interrupted the Barrister. ‘Did anyone at the theatre know about this girl?’

‘Good God! no,’ cried the Actor. ‘Not a soul. In this censorious world actions such as mine in that case are apt to be misconstrued, which alone was sufficient to make me keep it dark. No one knew.’

‘The first night—all was well. Molly went down in the afternoon, and it didn’t come out in any of the evening papers. Violet acted magnificently. She wasn’t Molly, of course—she isn’t now. But it was her chance, and she took it—and took it well. Next morning the papers, naturally, had it in. “Temporary indisposition of Miss Molly Travers. Part filled at a moment’s notice with great credit by Miss Violet Dorman.” She had a press agent and he boomed her for all he was worth. And I read the papers and cursed. Not that I grudged her her success in the slightest, but I was thinking of the afternoon. It was matinée day and the girl must read it in the papers.

‘There was only one thing for it—to go round and see her. Whatever happened I had to prevent her coming to the theatre. How I was going to do it without giving the show away I hadn’t an idea, but somehow or other it had got to be done. My blundering foolishness—even though it had been for the best—had caused the trouble; it was up to me to try and right it. So I went round and found her

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with a doctor in the sitting-room. He was just going as I came in, and his face was grave.

““Harry’s dying,” she said to me quite simply, and I glanced at the doctor, who nodded.

“Poor child! I crossed over to her side, and though it seems an awful thing to say, my only feeling was one of relief. After what Lawrence had said I knew it was hopeless, and since the poor devil had to go he couldn’t have chosen a more opportune moment from my point of view. It solved the difficulty. If he was dying she couldn’t come to the theatre, and by the time the funeral was over Molly would be back. I didn’t realise that one doesn’t get out of things quite as easily as that.

““I’ve only just realised how bad he was,” she went on in a flat, dead voice.

““Does he know?” I asked.

““No. He thinks he’s going to get better. Why didn’t you send for me last night, Mr. Trayne?”

“It was so unexpected, that I hesitated and stammered.

““I couldn’t get at you in time,” I said finally. “Miss Travers only became ill late in the afternoon.”

“With a strange look on her face she opened a paper—some cursed rag I hadn’t seen.

““It says here,” she went on slowly, “that she was confined to her bed all yesterday. Oh! it doesn’t matter much, does it?” She put the paper down wearily, and gave the most heartrending little sobbing laugh I’ve ever heard.

““What do you mean?” I stammered out.

““I suppose you did it for the best, Mr. Trayne. I suppose I ought to be grateful. But you lied that night—didn’t you?”

“I was fingering a book on the table and for the life of me I couldn’t think of anything to say. “He doesn’t know,” she went on. “He still thinks I’m a God-sent genius. And he mustn’t know.”

““Why should he?” I said. And then I put my hand on

her arm. “Tell me, how did you find out?”

“You admit it then?”

“Yes,” I said quietly, “I admit that I lied. I was so desperately sorry for you.”

“I mentioned it to someone—a man who knew the stage—about a week ago. He looked at me in blank amazement, and then he laughed. I suppose he couldn’t help it: it was so ridiculous. I was furious—furious. But afterwards I began to think, and I asked other people one or two questions—and then that came,” she pointed to the paper, “and I knew. And now—oh! thank God—he’s dying. He mustn’t know, Mr. Trayne, he mustn’t.”

“And at that moment he came into the room—tottered in is a better word.

“Boy,” she cried in an agony, “what are you doing?”

“I thought I heard Mr. Trayne’s voice,” he whispered, collapsing in the chair. “I’m much better to-day, much. Bit weak still——”

“And then he saw the paper, and he leant forward eagerly.

“Ill,” he cried. “Molly Travers ill. Why, my dear—but it’s your chance.” He read on a bit, and she looked at me desperately. “But why weren’t you there last night? Who is this woman, Violet Dorman?”

“You see, Tracy,” I said, picking up the paper and putting it out of his reach, “it was so sudden, Miss Travers’ illness, that I couldn’t get at your wife in time.”

“Quite,” he whispered. “Of course. But there’s a matinée this afternoon, isn’t there? Oh! I wonder if I’m well enough to go. I’m so much better to-day.” And then he looked at his wife. “My dear! my dear—at last!”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen such pathetic pride and love shining in a man’s face before or since.

“I’m afraid you won’t be quite well enough to go,” I muttered.

“Perhaps it would be wiser not to,” he whispered.

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"But to think I shall miss her first appearance. Have you come to fetch her now, Mr. Trayne?"

"Yes, darling," the girl replied, and her voice sounded as steady as a rock. "Mr. Trayne has come to fetch me. But it's early yet and I want you to go back to bed now. . . ."

Without a glance at me she helped him from the room and left me standing there. I heard their voices—hers clear and strong, his barely audible. And not for the first time in my life I marvelled at the wonder of a woman who loves. I was to marvel more in a moment or two.

'She came back and shut the door. Then she stood facing me.

"There's only one way, Mr. Trayne, though I think it's going to break my heart. I must go to the theatre.

"But—your husband . . ." I stammered.

"Oh! I'm not really going. I shall be here—at hand—the whole time. Because if the end did come—why then—I *must* be with him. But he's got to think I've gone; I've got to hide from him until after the matinée is over. And then I must tell him"—she faltered a little—"of my success. I'll keep the papers from him—if it's necessary. . . ." She turned away and I heard her falter: "Three hours away from him—when he's dying. Oh, my God!"

The Actor paused, and the Soldier stirred restlessly in his chair. 'I left shortly after,' he went on at length, 'I saw she wanted me to.

'All through the play that afternoon it haunted me—the pathos of it—aye, the horror of it. I pictured that girl hiding somewhere, while in the room above the sands were running out. Longing with all the power of her being to go to him—to snatch every fleeting minute with him—and yet condemned by my stupidity to forfeit her right. And then at last the show was over, and I went to her room again.

'She was by his side, kneeling on the floor, as I came in.

As he saw me he struggled up on his elbow, and one could see it was the end.

“Dear fellow,” I said, “she was wonderful—just wonderful!”

And the girl looked up at me through her blinding tears.

“Just wonderful,” I said again. Five minutes later he died. . . .’

The Actor fell silent.

“Did you ever see her again?” asked the Soldier thoughtfully.

“Never: she disappeared. Just a patch on the quilt as I said. But there was one thread missing. Three years later I received a registered envelope. There was no letter inside, nor word of any sort. Just these.’ He fumbled in his pocket. ‘There are twenty of them.’

He held out his hand, and the Soldier leaning forward saw that it contained a little bundle of five-pound notes.

BY
H. DE VERE STACPOOLE



JOHNSON AND THE VIATIQUE

TO give foreigners a just impression of English mentality it is just as well when you are in France to know French, also the French, and this remark applies also to Monte Carlo, the chief city of the kingdom of Monaco, for Monaco is French; though why I don't know, seeing it was brought up at the knee of Italy.

Do you know that it is worth writing a short story to emphasise a simple truth of every-day life? That, in fact, such a work may be a work of Art, and High Art too, so long as it conforms with the grand canon that the first lines of a short story, like the first year of a man's life, must have the gist of the matter in it. When you have done reading this short story you may turn to its first lines and decided for yourself whether it applies itself to the rule.

Johnson did not know French. He was a Manchester man with a small share in a large business to do with dry goods; he was also, like his partners, a highly moral and religious man; he had rather prominent front teeth and he wore glasses, was addicted to white waistcoats in summer on Sundays, and sang in the choir of the Simnel Street Baptist Chapel.

Travelling to Genoa on business with a hundred ten-pound Bank of England notes in his pocket, money of the firm for the purchase of certain silks in the Genoa market,

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he had made the journey by boat to Monaco—being a friend of Harvey Matheson, the shipping people, and getting the jaunt for nothing. He had reckoned without the sea-sickness which Neptune threw in, also for nothing, with the result that, landing at Monaco, William Johnson found himself in no fit state to proceed. He put up at the Hotel du Parc in La Condamine after enquiring the charges at half a dozen other establishments by telephone from the shipping office.

Next day, partly recovered, he penetrated into Monte, where the reflection of his prominent front teeth might have been seen in the plate-glass windows of the more important dry goods stores. Though he didn't know much French he knew the value of the franc, and the things he saw astonished him by their cheapness, for Monte Carlo in certain ways is not dear, especially with the franc hopping about somewhere near a hundred.

He lunched for eight francs at a cheap restaurant, and after luncheon he found himself in front of the Casino. He wanted to see the tables; it was a sight every man ought to see once, and he had no fear at all that he would be drawn into playing, he was too sensible for that.

All the same, the smell of the Simnel Street Chapel on a warm Sunday evening came wafted mysteriously across the sea to him as he received his ticket of entrance; and as he crossed the atrium to the door of the first roulette room, compunction came with him arm-in-arm, a new form of compunction quite different from the six and eleven three farthings sort.

Here was sin being committed on a big scale on limited premises, a sort of sin factory, in short.

Sin quite different from the sin of over-charging and making a seventy-five per cent. profit on blue marocaine or black velveteen. Here was gambling in its worst form. As he had often said himself, gambling unashamed, not hiding up side streets and receiving betting slips, bla-

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tant and in the open, colossal, killing its devotees like a Moloch.

Johnson had heard and believed that people were always committing suicide at Monte Carlo owing to their losses at the tables, and he was not far wrong in this belief, despite the fact that his imagination perhaps over-coloured the picture.

Strange to say, the rooms did not impress him; despite all the genius of Garnier and the gold of M. Blanc, they produced a distinct feeling of disappointment in the mind of William Johnson, from which fact a psychologist with a knowledge of his job would at once have arrived at the truth that W.J. was a man with an imagination.

They were smaller than fancy had painted them, dingier, stuffier—and frankly, beastly smelling, a fact specially evident to W.J., who had a clean palate, and who had not poisoned his olfactory nerves with nicotine.

A smell of cheap scent and rank foreigners filled the place, vague and deadened by the fumes of carbonic acid. The Casino keeps its windows closed, it muddles and dopes its victims with their own fumes and emanations, and this fact was apparent in, if not to, the mind of William Johnson before he had been in the place ten minutes.

He felt little interest in the goings-on. His usually alert brain felt heavy and he was conscious that his digestion was not working as it ought. Yet despite everything, he could not but feel surprised at the crowd round the tables.

There were elderly women here, women who looked like charwomen or cooks out of work; women with wealthy-looking bags stuffed with gambling counters; women with cards which they pricked now and then, following the play and the evolution of some absurd 'system'. Men of Middle Europe, of the Near East and of Blackpool.

The whole post-war Monte Carlo crowd indeed, both in front of the Café de Paris and round the tables, summed

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themselves up in Johnson's brain under the title, Blackpool; and he was no mean judge, in his way, of men, women, blouses and suitings.

Yet someone had told him once that Lord Salisbury had been denied admittance to the Casino because his brown shoes were dusty!

He took his stand at the second table on the right of the entrance, and began to study, not the players, but the game.

Though he knew next to nothing of roulette, his quick mind soon took up the points of this game that seems to have been invented by the devil to suit all customers, from the timid to the reckless.

He saw that putting your ten francs on the colour you could only lose or win ten francs, on a number you could only lose ten francs, yet *might* win three hundred and fifty. He noted that you win double your stake on the dozens and so forth and so on, taking it all in slowly and ever more filled with the infernal ingenuity that constructed this game, a game with all the intricate machinery of a clock.

Then, as he was watching, a woman on the opposite side of the table put ten francs on number 33, and the number turning up, she received three hundred and fifty francs.

Seeing is believing, and this sight gave the mind of Johnson, accustomed only to the ordinary profits of trade, a little jolt.

Of course this was gambling and not one of a hundred of the fools who backed the numbers had a chance of winning; still, it was fascinating to speculate that if she had put on a hundred francs she would have received three thousand five hundred.

He left the table and went to another.

It was at this table that William Johnson received the shock of his life, for, across it seated, near the croupier and nervously toying with a small heap of white ivory counters, sat Sebright, the cashier.

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Not the cashier of the Casino, but the cashier of Jackson, Bols & Johnson of Manchester. Sebright, the cashier of his firm, the man of accounts, whose holiday was always taken in August; Richard Sebright, who neither gambled, drank nor smoked, who was interested in Sunday-schools and wore mittens in winter. It couldn't be, yet it was. That red head, those rather long teeth and that scar on the temple 'owing to an abscess' could belong to no one else.

But Johnson had left Sebright in Manchester only a little more than a week ago, safe behind his desk; a thing as fixed as the Town Hall and as incorruptible—apparently! Amazed, half-stunned, doubting, he stood watching and waiting to catch the eye of the gambler who was now placing three counters in different positions on the board.

Then came the cry of the croupier and the spin of the wheel. Zero raked all the stakes into the pocket of the bank save the few halfpence on red and black, and Johnson, turning, left the room, crossed the atrium and sought the bar where only soft drinks are sold.

Here, failing to obtain a brandy and soda, he consumed half a bottle of Vichy water, and turned back to the atrium.

What should he do? The fact was plain: Sebright, like many another, had fallen, scooped the till and bolted. It must be so—and yet—well, there was no use in speculating as to whether it *was* so or not, the question remained if it was so, what should he do—he, William Johnson, partner of the firm to whom the till belonged? The police of course, there could be no compromising—mercy? Nonsense.

He paced the atrium. The bird was safe in the cage and he had nothing to do but put in his hand and take it out.

That he was a coward by nature was a fact that he did not know, a coward and an imaginative man, possessed of that dwarf sort of imagination that delights in picturing possibilities. Suppose Sebright were to pull out a pistol

and shoot himself? That would be a nice sort of thing, a shock to one's nerves that would last a lifetime.

Now, as a matter of fact, a defaulting cashier found in the rooms at Monte Carlo is very like a torpedo or mine found drifted up on the beach, a thing which may explode on being touched, or may not.

Recognising this fact unadorned by simile, Johnson paced the atrium biting his nails.

Why did people do this sort of thing, putting other people into such unpleasant positions? Why had this happened to him? Why had he come into the Casino? If he hadn't been so sea-sick on the voyage he would be safe now at Genoa. If he hadn't come by sea he wouldn't have been sea-sick. He was stating these facts and putting to himself these questions when, suddenly, from the door of the rooms came Sebright, right into his arms, as you may say.

Sebright recognised the other with a start, then he laughed.

'Well,' said he, 'things seem to be happening to-day. I'm broke, and here are you. Police outside, I suppose. Nice mess.'

'Yes,' said Johnson, 'nice mess.'

'But how in the nation did they find I was here?' asked the other, 'and why didn't they put the police on straight away without dragging you from Genoa?'

'I haven't been to Genoa yet,' said Johnson, 'and they've found out nothing. I came in here by accident half an hour ago, and saw you playing in the rooms and knew all, at once.'

'Good Lord!' cried Sebright, whose amazing brain could add up a column of figures at a glance, 'but this isn't chance, Mr. Johnson, this is Providence.'

'In what way?' asked the other unenthusiastically.

'They know nothing,' said Sebright. 'Now, listen to me, Mr. Johnson. Don't ask me why I did it. It was mainly

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Bols; that greasy chap got on my brain and I had little debts, and Manchester got on top of Bols. I got ten days leave, to be taken from my summer holiday, to see a sick aunt who died ten years ago, and I took two thousand which can't be missed for another month. I came here and in two days with a run of bad luck, I've lost the coin, every magg. I've had a bitter lesson. I'm no hypocrite. You've said to yourself, no doubt, "Here's a chap teaching in Sunday schools, showing himself to the world as a pious man, yet all the time a thief. That's not so. Before God, Mr. Johnson, gambling is my only vice—maybe too, I'm a hard man if hardly dealt with, but I'm no hypocrite. I believe in Providence. Look at the position; nobody knows what I've done but you, as sure as this hand is on my wrist, Providence sent you here to-day to pull me out, to finish its work, to put me on my feet, having taught me forever to go straight and quit play, which has been mostly on horse-racing and football. I'm broke, Providence has broke me. Lend me a hundred francs, for the luck's turned—that I feel. I'll play big and before to-night I'll wager I'll get everything back and more.'

'Lend you a hundred francs!'

'I tell you the bad luck's gone. I know it. Besides, it's for the firm. We've been scraping on rocks, Mr. Johnson, and that two thousand is wanted to meet bills in a month from now. I didn't think of that when I took the coin, the thing was done on an impulse and I wouldn't have cared, anyway, for Bols had been driving me and getting on my spine till I could have broke his head.

'You don't want to give me to the police,' went on the red-headed one. 'I'm an empty purse, anyhow, and besides you don't want to placard in Manchester the fact that you found me at the tables. It's no use to do that; folks would say, "What was he doing at the tables himself?" I'm not saying that to frighten you, Mr. Johnson, I'm just stating a fact.'

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It was the deciding fact with Johnson.

'But what will happen to you?' said he, 'if you lose the hundred?'

'What happens to everyone who is cleaned out here,' replied Sebright, 'I'll go for the viatique.'

Johnson understood him to mean that he would commit suicide.

'After that,' said Sebright, 'God knows what will happen to me, but that's my own affair. I swear *you'll* be bothered no more with me.'

Johnson had already decided. He sensed fully the fact that Sebright, despite his mad and criminal act, was straight in a way; he knew that the firm was in heavy weather and the loss of two thousand would be a very nasty blow. He felt somehow that Providence had sent him as an intervenor, he felt a curious assurance that the luck would turn, and he had a nasty suspicion that Sebright, before he committed the viatique, might in some way, by writing home perhaps, involve him (Johnson) in the business or at least give the fact of his visit to the Casino away.

This nasty suspicion was groundless in more ways than one, a child of his own not too nice mind. Sebright, though he could have brained Bols, was not the man to behave in a dirty way to a man against whom he had no special grudge.

He had already decided, but it took him five minutes before giving consent.

II

'I may be wrong or I may be right,' said he at last, taking a note for a hundred francs from his pocket-book. 'At all events I do it to save you, if save you I can.'

He gave the note to the other who thanked him, but without effusion. He knew Johnson. He knew all the factors that had made him decide on the loan, all except

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the fact—also a factor—that Johnson, like many mortals, was a gambler, unknown even to himself.

Johnson felt that the luck would turn.

If you ever feel like that, even if you are playing for beans, you are a gambler.

Sebright turned and led the way into the rooms. Having changed his note for counters he chose the first table on the left, found a seat just vacated and sat down. Johnson stood behind him.

As he stood the recognition came to him that a hundred francs was little more than a pound. It had seemed quite a sum when Sebright asked for it and when he had handed it over, this gaily-coloured note of the Bank of France. A little over a pound, and Sebright proposed to turn it into two thousand! He felt for a moment the sensations of that gastric nightmare in which the infinitely little presents itself in opposition to the infinitely great. He felt as though he were watching an ant setting to work to build a pyramid that *had* to be built, and in the space of a few hours.

Then he held his breath. Sebright had placed his whole pile on number 3. The wheel span, the ball pursued its frantic course, slowed, wobbled and fell into a slot with the click of the roulette ball, which is singularly like the click of a cocked pistol.

Sebright had won. Three thousand five hundred francs, close on forty pounds—and in less than half a minute!

Johnson, turning away from the table, left the room. He couldn't stand to watch it, sure in his mind that the next turn of the wheel would sweep everything away. His lips were dry. He paced the atrium. He sat down. He got up. He sought the bar, swallowed more Vichy water and returned.

Twenty, thirty, forty minutes passed—an hour.

Sebright must be winning. Playing desperately as he was, he would have been cleared out long ago—if he hadn't been winning.

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He came into the rooms. There was a crowd round the table on the left. He couldn't see the gambler; had he killed himself and had they carted him out by a side door? Johnson had heard of men shooting themselves and being rushed away like that. No. There was the red head glimpsed for a moment on nearer approach. Fool, why didn't he get up with his winnings—if he had been winning, as surely he had? Why, why!

Johnson, biting his nails, returned to the atrium, sat down and waited.

Ah, if he had only remained through all that séance what a game he would have seen, better than all the football matches ever played between Land's End and John o' Groats. For the luck was with Sebright and he hit the bank again and again with maximums as Hobbs hits the ball to the boundary. There were bad reverses, recessions of the tide, but it always came in again. It was perhaps not a great victory, as victories at Monte Carlo go, but it was a great battle and a winning one, and the victor left the rooms two hours and ten minutes after he had entered them and found Johnson waiting and paler than himself.

'Have you won?' asked Johnson.

'Yes,' said Sebright.

'How much?'

'Come to the Café de Paris,' replied the other.

Here, seated at a little table, Sebright sat mute as a fish—or like an anaconda that has swallowed an ox, whilst the waiter brought the brandy and soda.

Johnson did not drink. He sat silent and watchful whilst the other did.

'How much?' asked Johnson at last.

'Come to my room at the Alexandra,' replied Sebright.

The Hotel is close to the Café de Paris, and in five minutes they were in Sebright's room, where the anaconda discharged the ox on to the bed in the form of two big bundles of bank-notes.

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'Five thousand six hundred pounds as near as I can make it,' said he. 'Lord! I wouldn't do it again. I wouldn't do it again for fifty-six thousand pounds. Never again, never, never, never again. I've had my lesson. It's near broke me.'

'Five thousand six hundred pounds!' said Johnson.

Sebright began to unroll the notes. When the French print big bank-notes they print them big. Some of these were as big as hearthrugs, almost.

Sebright began to collect some of the notes.

'Here's two thousand pounds worth,' said he, 'and a bit over, it's the firm's money: take it lest by any chance I should lose it before we get back.'

Johnson took and counted the notes and put them in his pocket.

'And here's your loan to me,' said Sebright; 'ten times what you gave me.' He handed a thousand francs to the other.

Johnson hesitated.

'Don't be shy about taking it,' said Sebright. 'It's no more than your due, you risked that hundred—go on, now.'

Johnson took the note. It was better than nothing, but in his heart he felt that half of the winnings, when the two thousand had been deducted, was rightly his.

He had done nothing, assisted in no way at the play, simply lent the other a sovereign, so to speak, yet he felt bitterly that the half of three thousand six hundred pounds was being held back from him: that a generous man would have said, 'We'll split the winnings.'

Greed rose up in him, immense, yet he could do nothing. To demand half would be to make himself the accomplice of this defaulting cashier—yet he would have taken half with a ready hand if it had been offered to him.

More. He knew instinctively that such a demand would be useless. Sebright was not the man to part. Sebright

was a horribly hard nut, and Johnson had no nut-crackers. He couldn't threaten Sebright with the law because of the explanations that would have to be made in Court. Monte Carlo and Simnel Street Chapel wouldn't run in double harness—at least, without the jeers of the onlookers.

He bit his nails.

'Well,' said he at last, 'and what do you propose to do now?'

'When I get back to Manchester,' replied the other, folding up the remaining notes, 'I'll put this stuff in an annuity and never touch the interest, only to invest it, which I'll do in three and a half per cent. conversions. It'll be a tidy bit for my old age.'

'But surely you are not thinking of going back to Manchester?' said Johnson, suddenly and joyfully finding a knife in his hand.

'And why not?'

'Why not?—think. How can you go back to the firm?'

'They don't know anything,' said Sebright. 'No more than dead men, and the money's returned to them.'

'But I'm one of the firm,' replied Johnson, 'and I know everything, and in common justice to my partners you must see that——'

'Go on,' said Sebright.

'There's no going on, you must see that the thing is impossible, quite.'

A very ugly look came into Sebright's face.

'You'd tell on me, would you?' said he.

'It's not a question of telling, it's a question of honour to my partners.'

Sebright considered for a moment.

'I gave you that two thousand fearing that by any mischance I might lose it,' said he. 'I'll take that money back to Manchester myself. Hand it over, please.'

'Most certainly not,' said Johnson. 'It is the money of the firm, and in this room I am the firm.'

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‘I intend to take the money back to the firm myself,’ said Sebright. ‘Won’t you give it up?—very well.’

He walked across to the bell by the door and placed a finger on the ivory button. Johnson noted that he pressed it.

‘What are you ringing that bell for?’ asked he.

‘To give you in charge for stealing my money,’ replied Sebright. ‘The Casino will back me in my statement as to what I took from there. I’m not joking: you want a crash, and you’ll have one, by God.’

Johnson fumbled rapidly in his pockets, took the notes and flung them on the bed.

‘There you are,’ said he, ‘take them.’

Sebright took them and verified the amount. Whilst he was doing this a knock came to the door and a waiter appeared.

‘A bottle of Apollinaris,’ said Sebright, giving the order he would have given if his bluff had failed. Then to Johnson: ‘I did not know you before, but I know you now, you’d have barred my chance to get back to respectability—why? You know that I mean to run straight, that I’ve been frank with you, that what I did was the act of a madman, not of a criminal. Yet you’d block me out if you could, which you can’t. This money will go back into the firm’s pocket when I return at the end of the week, and you won’t talk. You haven’t the guts to talk, seeing that if you did Bols would raise a rumpus that would be heard all over Manchester, not to say England, and that you’ve taken nine hundred francs of my winnings, which would come out. Why man, you’re accessory after the fact. By jove, I’ve never thought of that before!’ Sebright chuckled. ‘It’s a question of honour whether I oughtn’t to tell the other partners. Well, we’ve had enough of this fooling, and now good day to you. See you when I get back to Manchester.’

The waiter brought in the Apollinaris as Johnson took his departure.

III

It was now five o'clock in the afternoon, the sun was sinking towards the Esterelles and the blue and brilliant day was softening to its close. Johnson took his seat outside the Café de Paris and before a cup of coffee.

His mind was not constructed to hold anger long or breed the spirit of revenge. Sebright had come out of a terrible hole with his help and had made him a paltry return. He would quite willingly have blocked Sebright's path back to respectability on account of that, but he couldn't and there was no use thinking about it; what really engaged his thoughts as he sat now before the Café de Paris, watching without seeing the crowd round him, was the great golden egg that Luck had dropped in Sebright's hat.

He felt a curious new sensation not unlike hunger.

Five thousand pounds!

Even a thousand.

If Sebright, with little more than a sovereign, had made five thousand, might not he, Johnson, with a fiver make a thousand?

Even five hundred, even a hundred.

Could he afford a fiver?

Over and above the thousand pounds of the firm's money, he had his travelling expenses, enough and to spare—and, of course, why, he had the nine hundred francs Sebright had given him in returning the hundred loan.

It was like Providence—at least, Luck.

'Have a try,' whispered the new spirit that was dominating him. 'Have a try while the thing's warm; don't try for more than five hundred; if you get that, drop it and go.'

He rose from the table and crossed over to the Casino, in front of which the pigeons were strutting in the evening sunlight. He stood to look at them.

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Then he went up the steps.

The rooms were pretty empty and, having obtained counters for his nine hundred francs, he took his seat at the table on the left and watched the play for a minute or two.

Then, reaching over, he placed a hundred francs on number 33.

The ball span and number 33 turned up.

IV

That evening at nine o'clock, Sebright, sitting in the hall of the Alexandra and smoking a cigar, saw a figure entering by the swing glass doors.

It was Johnson.

Johnson came towards him, and as he came Sebright knew instinctively what had happened, and chuckled. His mind, unlike the mind of the other, was constructed to hold hate. Johnson had tried to bar his path back to respectability, would have done so if he could. Sebright could have forgiven a blow, but not that.

Johnson took a chair at his table.

His face was white and his teeth seemed more prominent than ever.

'I have had a misfortune,' said he. 'I went in to look at the tables and, as a matter of fact, I was induced to play. I have lost all the money I had with me.'

'How much?' asked Sebright.

'A considerable sum.'

He didn't say that the thousand belonging to the firm was gone in a ghastly attempt to recapture the money he depended on for travelling and hotel expenses.

If he had made a clean breast of the business, Sebright's attitude might have been different—perhaps.

'In fact,' continued he, 'I have no money to take me home, let alone to Genoa. You've got to see me out of this.'

'Oh, have I?' replied the other. 'Now, look here, let's have this matter clear. You'd have broke me if you could.'

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I'm a hard man when my back's up, but I'll do one thing for you that you wouldn't have done for me. I'll keep my mouth shut. You can tell the firm you couldn't go on to Genoa because you were robbed. I'll say nothing, but as to lending you money or giving you money—not a sou.'

He rose up. The other rose also.

'Very well,' said Johnson, 'whatever happens will be on your head.'

Sebright turned and left the lounge and went up to his room.

He reckoned Johnson would be all right. He had his watch and chain and luggage and a diamond ring; he could cable home for money; but up in his room when he reached it, those words of Johnson's came back to him: 'Whatever happens will be on your head.'

Hard as he was he began to relent.

He had satisfied his desire for revenge—after all—after all——

He left his room and came downstairs to the lounge—but Johnson had gone. He did not know what hotel he was staying at—never had thought to ask. He stood for a moment in perplexity, then he got his hat and came out and wandered through the streets, down by the Casino, by the sea—not a sign of the man he was seeking.

He returned to his hotel feeling disturbed.

He would have felt more disturbed had he been able to follow the footsteps of the other, now making for La Condamine and his hotel, and had he been able to read his thoughts.

Suicide. That was the only way out—but how? A razor—his safety razor blade would do it—ugh!—no other way. 'Tell the firm you were robbed.' Yes, but how get home to tell them? Trapped like a rat in this place where suicide seemed to be a natural act.

Suicide, yes, that was the only way out—the only way.

Now Johnson, before committing suicide, would have

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padded the hoof to Calais, begging his bread, and swum the Channel after, and maybe it was that natural disinclination towards the heroic that found him ten minutes later in the private room of the proprietor of his hotel, pouring out his position before the stout and kindly little Monsieur Bonnard.

‘But, Monsieur,’ put in the latter, ‘what you ask is impossible. To lend you money to pay my bill and also to return to your home is beyond me. It is not done. You have lost this large sum, the Casino will know that—well, there remains for you only the viatique. It is quite simple, I will help you.’

Then Johnson, frozen with horror at the fat man’s cold-blooded suggestion, yet capable of speech and the indignation that inspires so many letters from travellers to *The Times*, turned on the other and gave him his opinion of Monte Carlo and its methods, till the innkeeper, suddenly taking his meaning, as a man takes a bullet, fell back in his chair and laughed and cried, so broken up with the accusation of the other, that he promised a thousand-franc note for travelling expenses, and told his accuser to let the bill stand.

‘For I see now, you are a true Englishman, Monsieur,’ said he, ‘and Englishmen always pay their debts.’

BY
TEMPLE THURSTON



MR. SIMMONDS' BIT O' BUSINESS

YOU may laugh at the romantic fancies of married folk and, because the adventurous period of pursuit and capture is over, say that these transports are merely sentimental by reason of the fact that their virgin glamour is gone. But they are none the less real and emotional exaltations.

When Mr. Simmonds the hairdresser and his wife celebrated the anniversary of their wedding, it was an intimate revival of all those emotions which both of them had experienced that day, some years before, when Mr. Simmonds with violet-oiled hair and carefully-dressed moustache had taken down to Margate, Rose Fuller—suddenly Mrs. Simmonds by reason of a silver arrow which, according to the wedding cards, had pierced and thereby obliterated her maiden name.

On these occasions, when his work in the shop was over, he did actually put violet oil on his hair and dress his moustache with a pomatum of his own preparation. Not an every-day custom this. Because the oil and the pomatum—this was their experience—left a greasy mark on the pillow slips and added perceptibly to the work of washing Mrs. Simmonds had to do.

But on the anniversary of their wedding day, Mr. Simmonds did so anoint himself, and Rose, from a bottom

MR. SIMMONDS' BIT O' BUSINESS

drawer where such things were stored, did actually take out those garments of her trousseau, which she had worn that day they went down to Margate. She also put under the pillow, the crepe-de-chine nightgown in which she had adorned herself that first night in the Royal Nelson Hotel, Margate, an establishment that did not attempt to compete with the luxury hotels on the front, but relied upon its name and reasonable terms—though in a somewhat unfashionable street—to attract its visitors. Mr. Simmonds had been attracted. And Rose had written on that occasion to everyone she knew on the hotel note-paper. It bore the sign of Nelson's Head with an anchor and looked better than you might suppose.

In addition to this and as soon as these preparations were made, Mr. and Mrs. Simmonds locked up the house and went out for the evening. On one occasion, but one occasion only, they sat in Hyde Park. The anniversary was the eighth of July. It was a fair evening and warm. The rosy twilight was deepening to the purple grey of a summer night. But they never did that again. A policeman, seeing Mr. Simmonds' affectionate attentions to his wife, had asked them to accompany him to the police station. They had said immediately that they were husband and wife, to which the policeman had replied:

'Everything you say will be taken down and given in evidence at your trial.'

What was more, he took out a notebook and wrote down what they had said. The indignation of Mrs. Simmonds knew no bounds. Not only was the sense of her own virtue outraged. Not only did she resent the policeman's implication that their married state was not a fact, but the whole of their evening—it was only the fourth anniversary of their wedding-day—was spoilt.

To her considerable surprise, Mr. Simmonds had advised her not to make a fuss.

TEMPLE THURSTON

'Let 'em get on with it,' he murmured to her. 'Let 'em stew in their own jooce.'

This, the policeman had overheard and taken down in his notebook. It was only the last word he missed. Mr. Simmonds generously gave it him again.

'Jooce.'

Professing a knowledge of the law superior to her own, Mr. Simmonds had permitted the officer to take them to the police station without further protest. And of course it was all right. The statement as to their married condition had been verified. Mr. Simmonds' demand that a man might be permitted to kiss his own wife anywhere, especially on the anniversary of their wedding-day was allowed.

'Only,' said the inspector—'Is there any need to go and do it in a place like Hyde Park?'

To which, Mr. Simmonds, the hair-dresser, redolent with the perfume of violet oil, had said a thing profoundly true of all romance. He had said:

'P'raps you don't know the difference between the Kilburn High Road and Hyde Park.'

It may sound a little cryptic, said like that, but Mr. Simmonds knew exactly what he meant.

Going home to their house over the shop in the Kilburn High Road, Mrs. Simmonds had candidly criticised her husband's complacency in the matter. By what she said, it was evident she had expected him to resent, even with violence, this imputation on the propriety of their behaviour.

'One 'ud think it wasn't decent to be married in this country,' she said.

To which Mr. Simmonds had replied:

'The law has to take its course. Don't ever interfere with the law. No good kickin'. No good strugglin'. If you're in for it, you're in for it. I know what I'm talkin' about.'

One would have thought to hear him, that Mr. Simmonds had a record of crime behind him. It roused no suspicions in Rose's mind, however, because she knew well enough. Anybody in their block of buildings in the Kilburn High Road knew. The hairdresser's business had been handed on to him by his father. He had been known in that neighbourhood since he was a little boy. His father had patented a balsam for the hair. Simmonds' Balsam. There were stacks and stacks of letters of testimonials. And then Augustus, himself, the son, had invented the pomatum. There was a good sale for that. He had agents, other hairdressers, all over the country. He was always finding new agents. Frequently he had to go away, five and six times a year, to different parts of the country. Stopping the night. Returning the next evening.

Of course there was no question of Mr. Simmonds having a record of crime. When he said 'I know what I'm talking about', she realised quite well what he meant. He was interested in crime. Always had been, since first she knew him. Read the papers. Was always the first to say when an interesting murder trial was coming on and could tell quicker and surer than anybody else whether the accused was guilty or not. Not guessing mind you, but working it out. Bit by bit.

'He'll swing,' Mr. Simmonds would say, to Rose perhaps, or may be to a customer and sometimes just as he was running the razor deftly over their throat. 'He'll swing.' And invariably he was right.

It was his favourite subject. Crime. Always talking about it. Not that she minded. A good murder trial, as Mr. Simmonds worked it out, was as good as any of those actors on the stage in a blood and thunder. Better than most of them. More real. After the verdict and the judge's sentence, he'd say—'Now he's for it.'

And once, when the trial had been particularly exciting

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and they had both got quite worked up about it, Mr. Simmonds had said—she never forgot that:

‘Three weeks and he’ll be walkin’ out of the condemned cell. Nine o’clock in the morning. Onto the trap. Pull the lever. Tug goes the rope. All over.

It was like seeing the whole thing happen. Made her feel quite funny. The snappy way he’d said it. There was no doubt he knew a lot about crime. And so it was, that evening in Hyde Park, she had submitted to his advice about the law. She had let the affair take its course. But nothing would ever have persuaded her to go and sit in Hyde Park again. On the anniversary of their next wedding day, they went to a cinema. No question about behaviour there. He could put his arm round her waist. At one moment when the hero and heroine met in a long embrace on the screen, Mr. Simmonds kissed her. Of course it was dark. But there was something stimulating, particularly to Rose, in the fact that they were not at home, not over the shop in the Kilburn High Road, but out in the world, strangers to all the strangers about them, revealing and at the same time hiding their secret, just as it had been, years ago, during their honeymoon at the Royal Nelson Hotel, Margate.

For this, you must understand, was the romantic nature of Mrs. Simmonds. And Augustus Simmonds, hairdresser in the Kilburn High Road, was such an affinity for her romantic sensibilities as few women can hope to find in the ordinary lottery of marriage. He believed as she did in the glamorous and unforgettable adventure of the honeymoon. It was his sentiment, as it was hers, to recapture those same emotions they had experienced in the Royal Nelson Hotel, where neither of them had been really averse to the common knowledge that they were a newly-married couple. Augustus had swaggered with her possessively on his arm, and Rose had blushed when she observed people whispering about them. But she had not

disengaged herself from that possessive arm. Indeed, secretly, they both had enjoyed the interest which their newly-married state had roused amongst the staff and the visitors of the hotel.

And this spirit of nuptial romance, celebrated with full honours as it were on each anniversary of their wedding, they had maintained for seven years. Not only on these occasions, did Augustus put the violet oil on his hair and the pomatum on his moustache, not only, after the shop was closed, did he put on his best suit, but he adopted a wooing manner towards Rose, partly playful, partly solicitous, yet with an underlying suggestion of possessive power which made her, to use a vulgar though graphic expression, as dough in the hands of the baker. Her eyes melted to his. When he addressed her in terms of affection—a frequent form of address on his part directly the shop was closed—she could only whisper in reply. An admirable man. An admirable husband. An exceptional lover.

In addition to this, so far as Rose was concerned, there was an attraction of mystery about Augustus. He was not merely a hairdresser by trade. Not to her. He did not forever talk about his shop as other men in trade characteristically did. He had for instance, no other friends in the hairdressing business. Indeed two of his greatest friends were policemen, who came in sometimes of an evening and discussed with him the latest murder trial that was in progress. And generally he knew much more about it than they did. Sometimes he even seemed sinister to her as he enumerated the salient points of the case, concluding his argument, as he always did when he thought the accused was guilty, with the remark:

‘He’ll swing, all right. You’ll see. The rope’ll be twitchin’ with him on the end of it.’

That was sinister. The way he used to say that. Not exactly that Rose objected to it. It made her shudder. And sometimes afterwards when he took her in his arms,

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she remembered it and trembled. But it was not an unlikeable sensation. There were some people who might think that hairdressing was a finickly, unmanly sort of business. It was sensations like these—this trembling in his arms—that entirely eradicated all such impressions of Augustus from her mind. He might be a hairdresser. He might be shingling and bobbing and setting women's hair from ten in the morning to six o'clock at night, but there was something about him to her that fulfilled all her romantic notions of manliness. He had an air about him. Even with his policeman friends. He seemed to have a power over people, a power in himself, that he was quite aware of. Sometimes he appeared to threaten people with it. One of those policemen was a self-opinionated man, very sure of his knowledge of the law, but Augustus could silence him, just by a look and a word. Then half an hour afterwards with her, he would be soft and flattering, like he was to the ladies in the shop, only meaning it, you understand. Not in the way of business as it was with them.

Undoubtedly Augustus was a character, and it is character that tells with women. It told with Rose. She adored him. She looked forward to those anniversaries of their wedding day with a turbulent emotion which, if one were to accept the verdict of the cynics, was nothing short of sentimentality in one who had been married so many years.

And it was approaching the seventh anniversary. The seventh! A little more than three weeks. Already that morning Rose had been out to look for her present for him. She was in two minds between a book on famous trials—rather expensive—and a bottle of eau-de-cologne. This in itself will serve to show the contrasts there were in the character of Augustus Simmonds. A book on famous trials or a bottle of eua-de-cologne. And she could not make up her mind.

MR. SIMMONDS' BIT O' BUSINESS

That evening was to settle it for her. That evening their two policeman friends were coming in to talk about the Trentside murder trial. The verdict was to be given the next day. It had been going on for a week. From the first Mr. Simmonds had said he was guilty. He had been almost eager about it in his conviction. Almost as though he had wanted the man to be hanged. She knew of course there was nothing like that in his mind. A kinder man there couldn't be. But he had his sense of what ought to be and what oughtn't to be. And when he made up his mind, there was no turning him from it. Must have been very self-willed when he was a child. You could see that by the way he killed the mice they caught in traps down in the store room.

The mice it appeared liked the pomatum that was put up in stiff cardboard boxes. But stiff as they were, this didn't prevent the wretched little animals from getting at it. They'd gnaw through anything and scratch their way anywhere. Mr. Simmonds hated the mice. No wonder. His pomatum. And the traps he set were not those break-back affairs. He didn't believe in them. The little beasts got away, often as not, he said. He preferred the old-fashioned trap in which the mice were caught alive. And he himself killed them afterwards. There was nothing namby-pamby about the way he did that. She saw him do it once and she didn't want to see him do it again. Not that he was brutal about it. No—seeing it was mice, it was humane enough. He was just set on it. You know. Bang—with a flat piece of board he kept for it, and that mouse didn't move again.

But anybody would have said he was a kind man. It was only that little way he had when he was talking about a crime. If he thought the person was guilty he said so and stuck to it, no matter what anyone else thought. And that evening, seeing that Mr. Cramp of the K division and Mr. Lottinga of the C division were coming in for a bit of

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‘Hangin’ in Nottingham gaol at the end of a nice stout piece of rope, three weeks from to-morrow.’

That was what Augustus said. He said it firmly, conclusively, finally, like a man who has taken an order and is quite sure he is going to be able to deliver the goods. You could see how certain he was, the way he made a loop knot of that string he was fiddling with and then, as he said ‘Three weeks from to-morrow’, pulled it tight over his finger. As if his finger was Giffard and he was hanging the man himself.

Three weeks from to-morrow. And that was their wedding day. Awful to think of a man hanging dead at the end of a piece of rope, and they jolly and enjoying themselves. Augustus opening the parcel of his book—nine o’clock—perhaps just at the very moment. Just when the hangman was putting the loop round his neck and then, like Augustus said: ‘Onto the trap—pull the lever—tug goes the rope—all over.’ Yes, all over for the wretched murderer.

She shifted uncomfortably on her seat. She exercised an effort of will to obliterate the picture from her mind. Was it going to be the book or the eau-de-cologne? He did always say it was very refreshing. Anyhow here was the chance to ask her question, so that he shouldn’t guess. While they were talking.

Both Mr. Cramp and Mr. Lottinga were of the opinion that Giffard would get off. Not enough evidence they said. And they knew what evidence was. In the courts of course.

Putting down his glass of stout on the table close to Mr. Lottinga’s helmet, Mr. Cramp said:

‘The law is if there’s any doubt, the prisoner gets the benefit of it. And to my thinking, in this case of Giffard, there is doubt because there ain’t enough facts. The jury has to judge by the facts.’

‘But what do you think yourself?’ said Augustus. ‘Do

you think he's done it?"

Mr. Cramp took up his glass of stout as though he preferred to drink rather than reply. And Mr. Lottinga sat with his head on one side and a speck of froth from his beer that he'd forgotten to wipe off his moustache. Neither of them said anything. So Augustus answered himself. It wasn't like him to let a question like that go by in silence.

'You won't say because you know,' he said, firmly—just like he did when he said to Rose—'Where's that banger?' when he was going to kill the mice.

'You know as well as I do,' he went on. 'He was the last person seen with her. He's a violent, passionate sort of chap. He was in love with her and she wasn't in love with him. We know all right and it's that sort of knowledge, makin' an impression, a feelin' you know, that gets hold of a jury. What's a jury know about the value of facts? When it comes to the verdict they go by what they feel. And do you think they aren't feelin' what you're feelin' and what I'm feelin' and what everyone's feelin' in that court. He was hooted by the public when they took him back to the cells. Did you read that in the last edition?"

Mr. Cramp hadn't seen that in his paper, but Mr. Lottinga had. They didn't count that to mean anything.

'All right,' said Augustus. 'You'll see. There's a bit of rope waitin' for Mr. Giffard at Nottingham three weeks from to-morrow,' and as though to mark the finality of his opinion, he loosened the loop knot on his finger and threw the piece of string on the table.

That was when Rose saw her opportunity. That pause.

'You ought to have been one of those men with wigs in the Court, Augustus,' she said. 'Wonder you don't get books and read up about crimes.'

'Only sort of books I'd care to read,' said he.

That settled it. It was a pity in a way, because the cau-

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de-cologne was much cheaper. But still, she could imagine his eyes jumping and that was good enough.

The next day, when the evening editions came out, Augustus was right. Giffard was sentenced to death.

'To be hanged by the neck until you are dead, and may the Lord have mercy on your soul.'

Augustus read out the sentence of the judge as though he had been proclaiming it himself. Of course men were like that. If they felt a thing ought to be, nothing would change them.

'And will it really be on our wedding day?' she asked.

He stood stroking his moustache. Then he took out his handkerchief. It smelt of jasmine. He blew his nose.

'That's when it'll be,' he said.

She determined to forget about it. She did practically forget about it, though the murder of Margaret Kellaway had been on everyone's lips for a week. She entirely forgot about it the morning, a week later, when Augustus said:

'Rose—I'm sorry—but we shan't be able to be together on our wedding day.'

She could only stare at him—open-mouthed. Not on their wedding day! After seven years!

'Why?' she managed to say.

'Well—I've got a little bit of business at Market Harborough,' said Augustus. 'New agent there for the pomatum.'

'But that day? Can't you go any other?'

'Can't,' said he. 'Impossible.'

And that was final. She could hear it. As final as his judgment on Giffard, the Nottingham murderer. As final as when he said: 'Give me the banger!' for the mice.

She could say no more.

On the eve of their wedding day, she went to see him off at St. Pancras, determining she wouldn't cry. Not if she could help it.

MR. SIMMONDS' BIT O' BUSINESS

He was worried. He was looking at her out of the corner of his eye. He knew what she was feeling and he was always tender with her at any time.

'Don't you fret, Rose,' he said as he was leaning out of the carriage window. 'We'll have it the day after tomorrow. You keep your present till then and I'll have a little extra one to give you for this job.'

She knew that. Always these times when he went away on these bits of business, he brought her back something. He was kind and generous like that, and always tender.

She couldn't help smiling as she put up her face for him to kiss. The guard was blowing his whistle. What did it matter if people were looking. They didn't care. Why he put his arm round her neck. Kissed her half a dozen times and then, just as the train began to move, he called out: 'My ticket!'

He had dropped it. It was lying on the platform. She picked it up and ran after him. The train was only moving slowly. There was plenty of time. As she gave it into his outstretched hand, she saw the name of the station printed on it.

It was not Market Harborough.

It was Nottingham.

Nottingham?

The train was slipping out of the station. He was kissing his hand to her. Faintly, querulously, she was waving hers back at him.

BY
HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL



PLAIN JANE

I

LORD PENDRAGON—prince of bankers and banker of princes—paused on the threshold of the door.

‘A last word, my dear; remember that you will go in to dinner ahead of all the duchesses.’

He murmured this with a faintly ironical smile. As the door closed behind his portly, ambassadorial form, Jane Timpany laughed, repeating in a whisper:

‘Ahead of all the duchesses!’

She glanced about her. In the big, over-decorated drawing-room there was no mirror. In the hall below, in the spacious corridors, mirrors were conspicuously absent. Visitors had noticed this.

‘So many beautiful women come to this charming house, Jenny. Your mother and you give them everything of the best, except the pleasure of beholding themselves and their frocks.’

Jane Timpany would reply, coldly:

‘I dislike looking-glasses.’

All the Timpanys had been plain people, physically and mentally robust, born and bred money-makers and money-savers. Thomas, Jane’s father, had married a woman nearly as rich as himself, out of another cotton-spinning family. During the war Jane lost her two

PLAIN JANE

brothers. After the war Thomas Timpany sold his mills, and, having nothing to engross his energies, died.

Bachelors, eligible and ineligible, had proposed marriage to Jane. To all and sundry she said, curtly, 'No.'

Finally, upon this eventful afternoon, a semi-royalty, by proxy, had flung his handkerchief at her feet. His Highness, whom Jane had met only twice, was apparently heels over head in love with '*les beaux yeux de sa cassette*'. A Minister Plenipotentiary, discretion incarnate, had refused to carry 'No' to a personage!

As a butler and two tall footmen were expediting the departure of his lordship, Jane ascended a marble staircase to her bedroom. Here she surveyed herself dispassionately in a cheval-glass. As she did so, she exclaimed once more:

'Ahead of all the duchesses!'

And then, in a whisper:

'Plain Jane!'

The adjective provoked a smile, and the smile had charm. Humorous lines revealed themselves round a large mouth; two small eyes twinkled. She curtsied to herself:

'Your Highness!'

Presently she went to her mother's room. Mrs. Timpany surveyed her daughter shrewdly.

'Well, Jenny?'

Jane sat down, staring at her mother's whimsical countenance.

'Lord Pendragon says that the Prince wants to marry me. He is coming back for a definite answer in a fortnight's time. If I am to be sold to the highest bidder, mother, I might do worse. I should dominate him; he would not dominate me.'

'He might try, my dear.'

'I said "No"; but our banker thinks I shall change my mind. I shant.'

Mrs. Timpany smiled.

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'When St. Peter asks me what I have done, I shall tell him that I brought into the world a sensible girl who refused to peacock about Mayfair as a princess.'

Mrs. Timpany spoke with a slight Lancashire burr. Her maternal grandmother had run about Oldham bare-headed, wearing the clogs, the woollen skirt, and the shawl still to be seen in the streets of that industrial centre.

Jane said, incisively:

'My money will make an old maid of me.'

'When I was your age, dear, I wanted a man. I've no patience with women who say they don't.'

'You were married for yourself, mother.'

'Yes—and no better-looking than you are. If you remain an old maid, Jenny, whatever shall we do with our money?'

'I'm not going to be married for my money. That's that.'

Mrs. Timpany picked up a letter lying upon her lap.

'You have heard me speak, Jenny, of the Tollerfields?'

'Dozens of times,' replied Jane.

'I have had a letter, a begging letter, from William Tollerfield. The Timpanys and the Tollerfields climbed the hill together before I was born. Poor William seems to have tumbled down the hill. Read his letter, dear.'

Jane read as follows:

'Dear Madam,

I take the liberty, as a friend of your late husband, to ask for financial assistance. We never met, but I married, you may remember, a schoolmate of yours, long since dead. Happily, misfortune never touched her. My father made the mistake of educating me as a man of leisure. The fortune left to me by him is gone. To-day I am a helpless invalid and almost hopeless. A grant in aid from you would sweeten my adversity. I enclose letters

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from my doctor and from the local clergyman which establish identity.

I remain,

Faithfully yours,

William Tollerfield.'

Jane stared at the letter. The handwriting was firm. Mrs. Timpany added a few words:

'The doctor says that his patient is in mean lodgings, suffering from arthritis. The parson says that the writer is known to him as William Tollerfield, son of Henry Tollerfield, of Oldham.'

'What do you want to do, mother?'

'He was a friend of your father.'

'Did father ever help him?'

'I don't know. You're not getting hard, are you, Jenny?'

'We receive so many appeals, mother. We have been let down so often.'

'He married, as he says, a girl I knew, a nice girl. There was a son. He doesn't mention the son. Perhaps he is dead, too, killed in the war. We—we ought to do something.'

Jane glanced at the letter.

'Mr. Tollerfield writes from Puddiford-on-Sea, near Cronmouth.'

'Yes, Jenny. If we slipped down there and investigated this case at first hand——'

'If you like.'

'Incog!'

'Mother! What an idea!'

'Our fashionable friends will think we have gone abroad.'

'It would be an adventure, mother. We—we should get away from our money for a few days, shouldn't we?'

'Yes, dear.'

Within three days, two ladies, who signed the register

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as Mrs. and Miss Stroud, took modest rooms at the Ivanhoe Hotel, a select boarding-house on the front at Puddiford-on-Sea.

II

Jane was astounded, and amused, by the startling change in her mother. Mrs. Timpany became almost frisky as Mrs. Stroud, and was accepted by the other boarders as an addition to their circle.

Within twenty-four hours Jane wandered down the street, not facing the front, where William Tollerfield lived in mean lodgings. A dingy window exhibited a sign: *Apartments*. Greatly daring, Jane rang the bell. The mistress of the house opened the door.

'If you have rooms vacant, I should like to see them,' said Jane.

'Pray walk in, madam.'

Gentility informed harsh tones. Jane leapt to the conclusion that the landlady might have been a lady's maid who had known happier days. She eyed Jane sharply, as she murmured:

'My best rooms are vacant.'

Jane inspected two bedrooms and a shabby sitting-room. Then she heard a familiar sound, the clicking of a typewriting machine. Jane looked up, listening, as the landlady explained:

'Typist. Not overworked, neither! Supports his father.'

William Tollerfield's letter had not been typewritten. Jane said tentatively:

'Is the father an invalid?'

The landlady, not at all garrulous, nodded, shaking her head dolorously. Jane was meditating another question, when the clicking stopped. An instant later a step was heard upon the stairs.

'I beg your pardon.'

A man about thirty stood upon the threshold of the sitting-room.

PLAIN JANE

‘I am going out,’ he said pleasantly. ‘My father will not disturb you unless it is necessary.’

‘Very good, Mr. Tollerfield.’

Jane sat down. She had liked the tones of a voice which had ‘supporting’ quality.

‘Unusual name—Tollerfield.’

The landlady, beguiled by Jane’s smile, became more communicative. The fact that Jane was sitting in the best armchair suggested business. Up to this moment intuition had told her that her rooms were not quite good enough for this quietly dressed lady. Still—one never knew!

‘It is a shame, I say, that a clever young man should be tied tight to a crippled father. Ought to be on his own. But there! It’s none of my business. Do you fancy the rooms, madam?’

Jane replied evasively:

‘I will speak to my mother about them.’

Terms were discussed. Jane returned to the Ivanhoe Hotel, anticipating maternal objections to any move for the worse. Really all that could be said of the rooms might be included in one sentence: ‘They are perfectly clean.’

Mrs. Timpany, looking like an alert robin, became interested in young Mr. Tollerfield.

‘Good stock,’ she declared. ‘I suppose we ought to find out more before we help.’

‘That is my idea, mother. Are you sure that the father won’t recognise you?’

‘We never met, Jenny. I’m ready to go where you want to go.’

So they went.

III

Nothing happened for a day or two.

The son, whose name, so Jane discovered, was John, seemed to be of a retiring disposition. Not so the father, who in his youth had pushed himself everywhere. Now he was pushed, like a baby in an immense ‘pram’, by his

son—generally along the front for two hours every afternoon. In the morning the continual clicking of the typewriting machine indicated literary labours. The landlady informed Jane that the Tollerfields sent off and received many letters. Jane was not surprised when the landlady whispered to her:

‘It’s my belief, miss, that the old man is a genteel beggar.’

‘Oh, dear!’ exclaimed Jane.

On top of this disconcerting affirmation, acquaintance was ‘scraped’ between the Tollerfields and the Strouds. Garrulous old age met over a dish of tea. Mr. William Tollerfield spoke of the far north. Quite incidentally, he mentioned the Timpany’s.

‘You’ve heard of the Timpanys?’ he asked.

‘Who hasn’t?’

‘Purse-proud snobs, madam.’

Jane winced, expecting an explosion from her mother. To her surprise, Mrs. Timpany’s sense of humour rose to the occasion.

‘Are they?’

‘Pinchers, my dear lady. Tom Timpany is dead. The women, mother and daughter, are rolling in money. Between ourselves, I—William Tollerfield, an old friend—applied for a small—er—grant in aid. What happened to my letter?’

‘Tell me.’

‘Waste-paper basket!’

‘Too bad!’

Jane observed mildly:

‘Probably these——’

‘Timpanys.’

‘Yes. These Timpanys, I dare say, receive such appeals by the dozen every day. But if you had a particular claim on them——’ Her voice died away, but she glanced at John’s impassive face. He answered curtly:

'My father's claim was the appeal of Misfortune to Fortune.'

Having said this, John's lips closed. His father embroidered the theme; and as he warmed to his work, Jane recognised in him some of the qualities of Mr. Micawber.

'To relieve necessity is a privilege accorded by Omnipotence to the rich. Personally, I share Heine's opinion——'
'Whose?'

'Heinrich Heine. A Hun, but he lived in Paris. He said that if you wanted to know what God really thought of millionaires you had only to look at them.'

The Timpanys looked at each other. William Tollerfield continued blandly:

'My friend Timpany married a plain woman, and their daughter, so I'm told, has a face like a nutmeg-grater.'

Even under this provocation, Mrs. Timpany murmured softly:

'Handsome is as handsome does.'

'Just so, madam, just so. I—er—was prepared to regard Jane Timpany as Anadyomene——'

'Anna——'

'Venus rising from the sea, my dear lady, lovely and lovable, had she responded to my S.O.S. signal.'

'Did you ask Mrs. Timpany to save your soul, Mr. Tollerfield?'

Thus Jane—with a tincture of acerbity. John glanced at her sharply.

'You are sarcastic, Miss Stroud, at the expense of age and infirmity.'

'No, no. But,' her voice hardened, 'from what your father has just said, I inferred that the rich might save *their* souls if they exercised the privilege of saving the bodies of the poor.'

William Tollerfield chuckled:

'I couldn't have put that more neatly myself.'

Harmony was restored, although John, with a vehem-

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ence which surprised Jane, plunged into an indictment of the rich. When he finished Mrs. Timpany said slyly:

‘According to you, young man, God helps those who help themselves out of other folk’s piles.’

Again the infirm William chuckled. A minute later father and son went upstairs.

IV

Alone with her mother, Jane exhibited indignation. Mrs. Timpany laughed at a too serious face.

‘I’m so sorry for them.’

‘You are always surprising, mother.’

‘So your dear father said. I should like to surprise these people.’

‘How?’

‘If we sent them a hundred pounds——’

‘Absurd!’

‘Would they relieve *our* necessities?’

Jane grappled with the issues.

‘What a test!’

Mrs. Timpany nodded.

Jane exclaimed:

‘How wonderful of you to get fun out of such a situation!’

‘I suppose I could whine, Jenny, if I tried hard enough.’

‘I’d like to see you at it.’

‘You shall. Really, this is gingering me up. I think plain food agrees with plain people.’

They talked with animation for half an hour. Long before that it was agreed that a hundred pounds should be sent to the old friend of Thomas Timpany. A letter was written:

‘Dear Sir,

My daughter and I regret that your letter of the 28th ult. was not answered more promptly. We are satisfied that you have a claim upon us. Kindly acknowledge

the enclosed cheque, which we hope will serve to sweeten your sad life.

Faithfully yours,
Bertha Timpany.'

As Mrs. Timpany was writing out the cheque, Jane observed reflectively:

'It's a good deal to pay for a bit of fun.'

'I like the young man,' replied her mother.

V

During the days that passed between the sending of this letter (from London) and its delivery at Puddiford-on-Sea, acquaintance between the Tollerfields and the Strouds ripened into intimacy.

Upon the Tuesday morning the letter arrived. Joyous notes of exclamation were plainly heard in the parlour beneath.

'He's got it,' observed Mrs. Timpany.

'What will he do with it?' demanded Jane.

'We shall be invited to tea.'

They were, and an excellent tea was provided. A cheque may be as rejuvenating as the Voronoff treatment. The infirm William beamed upon his guests, as John handed round the *friandises* sent in by the local confectioner.

'This is a farewell entertainment.'

'We are faring very well, Mr. Tollerfield, but—what do you mean?'

'My son and I are thinking of moving to better lodgings facing the sea.'

'Really? You might do worse than the Ivanhoe. We moved from there here.'" Mrs. Timpany sighed. She continued with an unmistakable whine: 'Not expensive, you understand, but beyond our diminishing means.'

Jane 'played up'.

'Now, mother, this is not the moment to impose our troubles upon Mr. Tollerfield.'

'Troubles?' repeated Mr. Tollerfield. 'Well, well, it is a relief sometimes to talk of one's troubles. A firm faith in Providence has always sustained me. At the same time, crippled as I am, I have fought my troubles. You behold me, madam, bloody but unbowed. Another cup of tea?'

'Thank you. If you would give me, also, *advice*——'

'The fruit of your own experience,' added Jane.

Slightly uneasy, Mr. Tollerfield said briskly:

'Certainly. With—er—pleasure.'

'We may have to move to humbler lodgings. Money due to us has not been paid. Under such circumstances, ought we to apply for help to certain friends? You applied to those——' She glanced at John.

'Timpanys!'

'Yes, yes. And they basketed you.'

For an instant there was silence, a silence significant to the Timpanys. Jane looked at John. Mrs. Timpany's twinkling brown eyes rested upon the genial William. John's cheeks flushed. By this time Jane had recognised in him the quality of altruism. Of his devotion to an exacting father there could be no question. The rich may be pardoned when they cock a doubtful eyebrow at what appears to be unselfishness. Probably they have reason behind the conviction that most people grind their own axes. Within ten minutes Jane had summed up the infirm William as a '*faux bonhomme*'. John, on the other hand, defied a spinster's analysis.

William spoke first.

'We have heard from the Timpanys. My—er—claim upon their consideration has been recognised. In point of fact, a grant in aid came this morning.'

Mrs. Timpany said quietly: 'How nice! Makes one think better of the world, doesn't it?'

William nodded majestically.

'I take the world as I find it, dear lady!'

'Taking,' thought Jane, 'is his hobby! What a man!'

John exclaimed explosively: 'I regret what I said about the Timpanys. They have been most generous—astoundingly, confoundingly so!'

'How nice!' repeated Mrs. Timpany soothingly. 'What you tell me makes it easier for me!'

'For us,' added Jane.

The astute William betrayed nervousness; his nose twitched, scenting importunity.

'You mean that you will be emboldened to apply to your friends for some—er—slight assistance. An appeal—discreetly worded—'

He paused. Obviously, out of a rich vocabulary, he was considering phrases.

'I—I have never appealed to—to anybody,' murmured Mrs. Timpany.

William, apparently much moved, exclaimed: '*I'm* at your service.'

Jane, with a sideglance at John, said gratefully: 'Oh, Mr. Tollerfield, we—we couldn't accept a grant in aid from you, but how sweet of you to think of it.'

William inflated.

'No, no. I appreciate your delicacy, but I—I will word this appeal for you. It will be a mournful pleasure to do so.'

'But I can't think to whom I could apply,' said Mrs. Timpany despairingly. 'Ten pounds would tide us over a distressing fortnight, but—'

Jane added with dignity: 'We have no near relations. Our rich friends—for reasons which we need not go into—would hardly believe that we, mother and I, really wanted ten pounds.'

William nodded like the Olympian Jupiter as he suggested: 'An overdraft at your bankers?'

'We have never asked our bankers to allow us an overdraft. It might upset them,' faltered Mrs. Timpany.

William cleared his throat and vision.

'You have asked for my advice. I reply, unhesitatingly, *write to the Timpanys.*'

He folded his hands upon an ample paunch.

'I will dictate a letter—here and now. John!'

'Father!'

'Your note-book.' As John rose from the tea-table, William, now master of the situation, said incisively: 'Ten pounds is a bagatelle. Friends and relations should be kept in—er—*reserve* for more serious exigencies. Ha! An idea! Are you ready, John?'

John, pencil in hand, nodded, but he looked—so Jane thought—ill at ease.

'Take this down, my boy, as a rough draft. One moment!' He closed his eyes, smiling graciously.

'Yes, yes: I have it. You told me, Mrs. Stroud, that you came from the north country. You mentioned Oldham in the course of conversation. Oldham shall be the keystone of our arch. Now! "Dear Madam—You will be surprised that a stranger should venture to address you, to entreat from you sorely needed help. Nothing, save the fact that your generosity and beneficence are known throughout the Kingdom"—capital K for Kingdom, John—"justifies me in making this"—I want an adjective—Yes—I have it—"poignant appeal. Like yourself, I am a widow with one daughter. I was born in Oldham"; underline that John——'

'Were you born in Oldham, mother?' asked Jane.

'I was born not far from Oldham, Jenny. Does it matter?'

'Not a bit,' replied William. 'A touch of local colour. I continue—"I was born in Oldham. At the moment I am stranded in—er—mean lodgings at Puddiford-on-Sea, where, by a Providential coincidence, I have made the

acquaintance of the Tollerfields. Mr. William Tollerfield has spoken to me in confidence of you and of your daughter. What he said cannot, of course, be repeated, but I gleaned"—gleaned is quite good!—"I gleaned from Mr. Tollerfield that you were one who—who——"'

Jane finished the sentence.

'Did not hurl such letters as this into the void of the waste-paper basket.'

'Put it down, John.'

John did so.

'We pause for a suitable climax,' said William, once more closing his eyes. 'Yes—yes—this will serve. "I am expecting within a few days a remittance." That is the truth, madam, isn't it?'

'It is,' murmured Mrs. Timpany.

'“But, alas! I may be constrained by necessity to seek humbler lodgings before the remittance reaches me. Will you help me with a loan of ten pounds, which I pledge myself to return? Mr. Tollerfield would, I know, permit me to cite him as a reference and——”'

John stood up. He tore from the note-book the sheet of pencillings, crumpled it up, and hurled it into the Tollerfield waste-paper basket.

'Explain yourself,' commanded William.

'That reference to us. It's too thick. I—I can't stick it, father. I—I will lend ten pounds gladly to Mrs. Stroud—'

'You?'

Obviously William was astounded that his son should have ten pounds to lend. He was glaring at John. Mrs. Timpany rose, and, with her, Jane. As quickly John hastened to the door and opened it.

'I quite understand,' said Mrs. Timpany.

'So do I!' said Jane.

'But I don't!' thundered an angry father.

The ladies withdrew.

Safe in the sanctuary of the shabby parlour, Mrs. and Miss Timpany heard voices raised in altercation.

'I am not disappointed in John,' observed Mrs. Timpany. 'He takes after his dear mother, a very unselfish woman.'

'We have squandered a hundred pounds, mother.'

'No, Jenny. Our money has been invested. But—don't ask any bothering questions yet.'

'I hear John's step on the stairs.'

'Really? How do you know that it is John's? As you do know, I will leave you to deal with him.'

There was a tap on the door. Mrs. Timpany fled into her bedroom; Jane said 'Come in'.

John came in, still flushed of cheek. Jane indicated a chair. The young man hesitated, glanced at an impassive countenance, and sat down.

'Is it necessary to say anything?' asked Jane calmly.

'Yes. Miss Stroud, I am sure that you are an understanding person, but you can't know all the unhappy facts. Mrs. and Miss Timpany sent my father one hundred pounds.'

'No doubt they could afford to do so.'

'That is not the point.'

'I think I see your point.'

'I'm sure you do. Out of one hundred pounds my father might well have spared ten pounds to—to help you. But I am not here to pass judgment on him. I beg you to accept, as a temporary loan, ten pounds from me. I shall take it as unfriendly of you if you don't!'

Jane said hurriedly: 'I will accept that in—in the spirit which offers it.'

John handed her an envelope. Then he said stiffly: 'The generosity of the Timpanys, Miss Stroud, has swept some cobwebs out of my mind. You may have regarded me as a Bolshie.'

‘Oh, no.’

Her rare smile encouraged him to go on. ‘I would not have you think ill of my poor father, because, in spite of his infirmities, he remains genial and even gay. That is something, isn’t it?’

A pathetic interrogation touched Jane.

‘It is—much,’ she assented.

‘When that cheque arrived this morning, he was the first to suggest that he might engage a man-nurse to relieve me, to—to leave me free to fight for my own hand?’

‘How do you propose to do that?’

‘I am counting on the Timpanys. They have placed me under obligations. I would serve them faithfully. I am more than a mere typist and stenographer. In acknowledging receipt of that cheque, I have placed myself unreservedly at their service. It would be a great honour to work for them.’

‘You have told your father?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Why have you told me?’

He remained silent, lifting eloquent eyes to hers.

Jane murmured: ‘This is a proof of friendship?’

‘Yes.’

Obviously the young man was shy. Jane blushed as he exclaimed:

‘I am so glad you are poor, Miss Stroud.’

‘I don’t know how to take that.’

‘I mean that it makes friendship between us possible. Will you accept me as your friend?’

‘Yes,’ said Jane firmly. ‘Now tell me in what way you can serve these—Timpanys.’

‘I’m an expert accountant, Miss Stroud. I had to leave a famous firm of actuaries to look after my father when he was stricken down with inflammatory rheumatism. They would vouch for me. As an accountant, a confidential secretary——’

'Quite,' said Jane. 'But it is certain that the Timpanys, being women, leave the management of their affairs in competent hands.'

'They must be more or less at the mercy of unscrupulous persons. If—if I could save them from being imposed upon.'

'That is a brain-wave,' said Jane.

John, however, refused to talk further about himself. With pressing insistency he asked many questions indicating sympathetic interests in Mrs. and Miss Stroud. Jane, not being an accomplished liar, told the truth with discreet veilings. She admitted that life had been difficult, a series of compromises.

'We all want—romance.'

Each, in turn, defined romance. They parted to meet again in a shelter upon the Marine Parade, not a romantic spot. John read the rough draft of a letter to Mrs. Timpany. Jane said demurely that she thought it would do.

'You have shown it to your father, Mr. Tollerfield?'

'No, no. He would have insisted on writing it himself.'

'Probably Mrs. Timpany will suggest a personal interview, if—if she *understands* all that you have left unwritten.'

John perceived that Jane was smiling. Her smile percolated through sensitive tissues. He decided that he had never seen such an all-weather smile. He seized Jane's firm hand and pressed it. Jane blushed for the second time that day, recalling what her mother had said about this young man's mother. Obviously he had inherited much from her.

'What would you do,' asked Jane irrelevantly, 'if you were rich enough to do what you like?'

He replied fervently: 'I should ask you to marry me.'

'Mr. Tollerfield!'

'I beg your pardon, Miss Stroud, but I cannot disguise my feelings.' He spoke so sorrowfully that Jane's smile came back.

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‘Evidently you can’t,’ she murmured.

John said hastily: ‘I have nailed my flag to the mast. You know now how it is with me. Accept me——’

‘Accept you?’

‘On “appro.” I may make good. I may not. These blessed Timpanys have saved the situation. I can go back to work. Back of my work you stand. Have I forfeited your friendship?’

‘N-n-no.’

‘Fine!’ He spoke briskly, regarding her with shining eyes. ‘We—we carry on, as we were, till——’

‘Till——?’

‘Till I get a sign from you.’

She nodded, slightly bewildered. A more sophisticated lover might have accepted that nod as a sign. Jane stood up.

‘I will go back to my mother.’

In exciting silence they strolled towards their lodgings.

VII

Invariably punctual, Lord Pendragon presented his august person to Miss Timpany when the time limit imposed by him had expired. He looked portentously bland when the butler told him that Mrs. Timpany and Miss Timpany had returned to Prince’s Gate the day before.

Jane received him, looking, so he thought, rejuvenated. As the butler was leaving the drawing-room, she said, disconcertingly: ‘I am expecting a Mr. Tollerfield, Judkins. He will ask to see my mother. But you can show him up here.’

Judkins withdrew.

Lord Pendragon extended two white plump hands.

‘My dear young lady, am I to be the first to congratulate you?’

‘Upon what?’

‘Upon your engagement to His Serene Highness? He

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was pleased, let me tell you, at your maidenly hesitation. And so, quite frankly, was I.'

'But I didn't hesitate. I said "No".'

Lord Pendragon shrugged his shoulders.

'I took that "No" as "Perhaps".'

'If I had said "Perhaps"——'

'Ah! You smile. All is well.'

He sat down as Jane, still smiling, sank into billowy cushions. He was thinking that this young woman intended to surrender, but not unconditionally. He noticed that Jane glanced at a magnificent Louis XV clock.

'You came back yesterday. You were expecting me?'

'Yes. It is kind of you, Lord Pendragon, to be so interested in finding me a husband. But—do you really know the right man when you see him?'

The famous banker screwed an eyeglass into his eye. Mellifluously, he stated that such knowledge was his inalienable possession.

'You know men,' admitted Jane, 'but do you know women?'

Wisely, Lord Pendragon hesitated. Jane went on: 'Pomps and vanities have never appealed to me. My father's money is a terrible responsibility.'

'A husband would relieve you, my dear, of that responsibility.'

As he spoke Jane's eyes wandered once more to the clock.

'I am expecting a young man at four. He has applied for the post of confidential secretary. As my father's friend, as our friend and banker, is it too much to ask you to see him?'

Lord Pendragon assured Jane that it would be a privilege.

'I shall leave you before he comes. I shall be in the next room. I want you to talk to him. I want your honest opinion of him as a man. He has worked for a well-known

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firm of actuaries, and I—mother and I—thought that he might deal honestly and faithfully with all the appeals that are made to us. Your opinion of him would carry weight with us.'

'Delighted to help your mother and you.'

'You will see him first?'

'Certainly.'

'If—if he satisfies you that he can relieve us of these ever-increasing responsibilities, you can tell me so, and then I will see him.'

'You are a very sensible young woman.'

'Thank you. He has just come.'

Jane escaped as Judkins threw open the door and announced majestically: 'Mr. Tollerfield, my lord.'

VIII

Within ten minutes Lord Pendragon delivered to Mrs. and Miss Timpany a considered verdict. He spoke with lowered tone of voice, inasmuch as Mr. Tollerfield was in the next room.

'I am satisfied with this young man. His credentials, apart from those he carries in his pocket, are printed in indelible ink upon a singularly prepossessing face. I say emphatically—"Accept his services".'

'You think him incapable of betraying a trust?'

'I do. And I am seldom mistaken in my judgments of men.'

Mrs. Timpany observed with dignity: 'I knew his mother. She was my friend.'

'I will see Mr. Tollerfield,' said Jane slowly. 'Whilst I am seeing him, my mother will explain to you why I shall never go in to dinner ahead of the duchesses.'

IX

When the astounded John beheld Jane his quick wits for the moment failed him. It did not occur to him that

Jane was Miss Timpany. He said gaspingly:

'You? *Here?*'

He admitted afterwards that his first overwhelming conviction was that his humble friend had pulled Fortune's strings.

'Yes,' replied Jane, softly. 'I am here. Lord Pendragon is with Mrs. Timpany. You appear to have satisfied him. All that you wanted appears to be yours.'

'*All?*' asked John eagerly.

'Perhaps—more than you bargained for.'

But the sign had been given and accepted as such. Jane found herself in a lover's arms. Presently he said wonderingly: 'By some extraordinary coincidence, you are, of course, Mrs. Timpany's companion?'

'Oh, dear, I—I thought you had guessed!'

He glanced from her face to her frock.

'Impossible!' he exclaimed vehemently, as illumination descended on him.

She smiled at him reassuringly.

'My man must never say that.'

BY
HUGH WALPOLE



MR. ODDY

THIS may seem to many people an old-fashioned story; it is perhaps for that reason that I tell it. I can recover here, it may be, for myself something of the world that is already romantic, already beyond one's reach, already precious for the things that one might have got out of it and didn't.

London of but a few years before the war! What a commonplace to point out its difference from the London of to-day and to emphasise the tiny period of time that made that difference!

We were all young and hopeful then, we could all live on a shilling a year and think ourselves well off, we could all sit in front of the lumbering horse 'buses and chat confidentially with the omniscient driver, we could all see Dan Leno in Pantomime and watch Farren dance at the Empire, we could all rummage among those cobwebby streets at the back of the Strand where Aldwych now flaunts her shining bosom and imagine Pendennis and Warrington, Copperfield and Traddles cheek by jowl with ourselves, we could all wait in the shilling queue for hours to see Ellen Terry in *Captain Brassbound* and Forbes Robertson in *Hamlet*, we could all cross the street without fear of imminent death, and above all we could all sink ourselves into that untidy higgledy-piggledy smoky and

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beery and gas-lampy London gone utterly and for ever.

But I have no wish to be sentimental about it; there is a new London which is just as interesting to its new citizens as the old London was to myself. It is my age that is the matter; before the war one was so *very* young.

I like, though, to try and recapture that time, and so, as a simple way to do it, I seize upon a young man; Tommy Brown we will call him. I don't know where Tommy Brown may be now; that Tommy Brown who lived as I did in two very small rooms in Glebe Place, Chelsea, who enjoyed hugely the sparse but economical meals provided so elegantly by two charming ladies at 'The Good Intent' down by the river, that charming hostelry whence looking through the bow windows you could see the tubby barges go floating down the river and the thin outline of Whistler's Battersea Bridge, and in the small room itself were surrounded by who knows what geniuses in the lump, geniuses of Art and Letters, of the Stage and of the Law.

For Tommy Brown in those days life was Paradisal.

He had come boldly from Cambridge to throw himself upon London's friendly bosom; despite all warnings to the contrary he was certain that it would be friendly; how could it be otherwise to so charming, so brilliant, so unusually attractive a young man? For Tommy was conceited beyond all that his youth warranted, conceited indeed without any reason at all.

He had, it is true, secured the post of reviewer to one of the London daily papers; this seemed to him when he looked back in later years a kind of miracle, but at the time no miracle at all, simply a just appreciation of his extraordinary talents. There was also reposing in one of the publisher's offices at that moment the manuscript of a novel, a novel that appeared to him of astonishing brilliance, written in the purest English, sparkling with wit, tense with drama.

These things were fine and reassuring enough, but there was more than that; he felt in himself the power to rise to the greatest heights; he could not see how anything could stop him, it was his destiny.

This pride of his might have suffered some severe shocks were it not that he spent all of his time with other young gentlemen quite as conceited as himself. I have heard talk of the present young generation and its agreeable consciousness of its own merits, but I doubt if it is anything in comparison with that little group of fifteen years ago. After all, the war has intervened—however young we may be and however greatly we may pretend this is an unstable world and for the moment heroics have departed from it. But for Tommy Brown and his friends the future was theirs and nobody could prevent it. Something pathetic in that as one looks back.

Tommy was not really so unpleasant a youth as I have described him—to his elders he must have appeared a baby, and his vitality at least they could envy. After all, why check his confidence? Life would do that heavily enough in its own good time.

Tommy, although he had no money and no prospects, was already engaged to a young woman, Miss Alice Smith. Alice Smith was an artist sharing with a girl friend a Chelsea studio, and she was as certain of her future as Tommy was of his.

They had met at a little Chelsea dance, and two days after the meeting they were engaged. She had no parents who mattered, and no money to speak of, so that the engagement was the easiest thing in the world.

Tommy, who had been in love before many times, knew, as he told his friend Jack Robinson so often as to bore that gentleman severely, that this time at last he knew what love was. Alice ordered him about—with her at any rate his conceit fell away—she had read his novel and pronounced it old-fashioned, the severest criticism

she could possibly have made, and she thought his reviews amateur. He suffered then a good deal in her company. When he was away from her he told himself and everybody else that her critical judgment was marvellous, her comprehension of all the Arts quite astounding, but he left her sometimes with a miserable suspicion that perhaps after all he was not going to do anything very wonderful and that he would have to work very hard indeed to rise to her astonishing standards.

It was in such a mood of wholesome depression that he came one beautiful spring April day from the A.B.C. shop where he had been giving his Alice luncheon, and found his way to an old bookshop on the riverside round the corner from Oakley Street. This shop was kept by a gentleman called Mr. Burdett Coutts, and the grand associations of his name gave him from the very first a sort of splendour.

It was one of those old shops of which there are, thank God, still many examples surviving in London, in which the room was so small and the books so many that to move a step was to imperil your safety. Books ran in thick, tight rows from floor to ceiling everywhere, were piled in stacks upon the ground and hung in perilous heaps over chairs and window ledges.

Mr. Burdett Coutts himself, a very stout and grizzled old man enveloped always in a grey shawl, crouched behind his spectacles in a far corner and took apparently no interest in anything save that he would snap the price at you if you brought him a volume and timorously inquired. He was not one of those old booksellers dear to the heart of Anatole France and other great men who would love to discourse to you of the beauties of 'The Golden Ass', the possibility of Homer being a lady, or the virtues of the second Hyperion over the first. Not at all; he ate biscuits which stuck in his grizzly beard, and wrote perpetually in a large moth-eaten ledger which was sup-

posed by his customers to contain all the secrets of the universe.

It was just because Mr. Coutts never interfered with you that Tommy Brown loved his shop so dearly. If he had a true genuine passion that went far deeper than all his little superficial vanities and egotisms, it was his passion for books—books of any kind.

He had at this time no fine taste—all was fish that came to his net. The bundles of Thackeray and Dickens, parts tied up carelessly in coarse string, the old broken-backed volumes of Radcliffe and Barham and Galt, the red and gold Colburn's novelists, all these were exciting to him, just as exciting as though they had been a first Gray's *Elegy* or an original *Robinson Crusoe*.

He had, too, a touching weakness for the piles of fresh and neglected modern novels that lay in their discarded heaps on the dusty floor; young though he was, he was old enough to realise the pathos of these so short a time ago fresh from the bursting presses, so eagerly cherished through months of anxious watching by their fond authors, so swiftly forgotten, dead almost before they were born.

So he browsed, moving like a panting puppy with inquisitive nose from stack to stack with a gesture of excitement, tumbling a whole racket of books about his head, looking then anxiously to see whether the old man would be angry with him, and realising for the thousandth time that the old man never was.

It was on this day, then, rather sore from the arrogancies of his Alice, that he tried to restore his confidence among these friendly volumes. With a little thrill of excited pleasure he had just discovered a number of the volumes born of those romantic and tragedy-haunted Nineties. Here in little thin volumes were the stories of Crackanthorpe, the poems of Dowson, *The Keynotes* of George Egerton, *The Bishop's Dilemma* of Ella d'Arcy, *The Happy Hypocrite* of Max Beerbohm.

Had he only been wise enough to give there and then for that last whatever the old man had asked him for it he would have been fortunate indeed, but the pennies in his pocket were few—he was not yet a book collector, but rather that less expensive but more precious thing, a book adorer. He had the tiny volume in his hand, when he was aware that someone had entered the shop and was standing looking over his shoulder.

He turned slowly and saw someone who at first sight seemed vaguely familiar, so familiar that he was plunged into confusion at once by the sense that he ought to say ‘How do you do?’ but could not accurately place him. The gentleman also seemed to know him very well, for he said in a most friendly way, ‘Ah, yes, the “Nineties”, a very fruitful period.’

Tommy stammered something, put down the Max Beerbohm, moved a little, and pulled about him a sudden shower of volumes. The room was filled with the racket of their tumbling, and a cloud of dust thickened about them, creeping into eyes and mouth and nose.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ Tommy stammered, and then, looking up, was sorry the more when he saw how extremely neat and tidy the gentleman was and how terribly the little accident must distress him.

Tommy’s friend must have been between sixty and seventy years of age, nearer seventy perhaps than sixty, but his black hair was thick and strong and stood up *en brosse* from a magnificent broad forehead. Indeed, so fine was the forehead and the turn of the head that the face itself was a little disappointing, being so round and chubby and amiable as to be almost babyish. It was not a weak face, however, the eyes being large and fine and the chin strong and determined.

The figure of this gentleman was short and thick-set and inclined to stoutness; he had the body of a prize-fighter now resting on his laurels. He was very beautifully

clothed in a black coat and waistcoat, pepper-and-salt trousers, and he stood leaning a little on a thick ebony cane, his legs planted apart, his whole attitude that of one who was accustomed to authority. He had the look of a magistrate, or even of a judge, and had his face been less kindly Tommy would have said good-day, nodded to Mr. Burdett Coutts, and departed, but that was a smile difficult to resist.

‘Dear me,’ the gentleman said, ‘this is a very dusty shop. I have never been here before, but I gather by the way that you knock the books about that it’s an old friend of yours.’

Tommy giggled in a silly fashion, shifted from foot to foot, and then, desiring to seem very wise and learned, proved himself only very young and foolish.

‘The “Nineties” are becoming quite romantic,’ he said in his most authoritative voice, ‘now that we’re getting a good distance from them.’

‘Ah, you think so!’ said the gentleman courteously; ‘that’s interesting. I’m getting to an age now, I’m afraid, when nothing seems romantic but one’s own youth and, ah, dear me! that was a very long time ago.’

This was exactly the way that kindly old gentlemen were supposed to talk, and Tommy listened with becoming attention.

‘In my young day,’ his friend continued, ‘George Eliot seemed to everybody a magnificent writer: a little heavy in hand for these days, I’m afraid. Now who is the God of your generation, if it isn’t impertinent to inquire?’

Tommy shifted again from foot to foot. Who was the God of his generation? If the truth must be told, in Tommy’s set there were no Gods, only young men who might be Gods if they lived long enough.

‘Well,’ said Tommy awkwardly, ‘Hardy, of course—er—it’s difficult to say, isn’t it?’

‘Very difficult,’ said the gentleman.

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There was a pause then, which Tommy concluded by hinting that he was afraid that he must move forward to a very important engagement.

'May I walk with you a little way?' asked the gentleman very courteously, 'such a very beautiful afternoon.'

Once outside in the beautiful afternoon air everything was much easier; Tommy regained his self-confidence, and soon was talking with his accustomed ease and freedom. There was nothing very alarming in his friend after all, he seemed so very eager to hear everything that Tommy had to say. He was strangely ignorant too; he seemed to be interested in the Arts, but to know very little about them; certain names that were to Tommy household words were to this gentleman quite unknown. Tommy began to be a little patronising. They parted at the top of Oakley Street.

'I wonder if you'd mind,' the gentleman said, 'our meeting again? The fact is, that I have very little opportunity of making friends with your generation. There are so many things that you could tell me. I am afraid it may be tiresome for you to spend an hour or two with so ancient a duffer as myself, but it would be very kind of you.'

Tommy was nothing if not generous; he said that he would enjoy another meeting very much. Of course he was very busy and his spare hours were not many, but a walk another afternoon could surely be managed. They made an appointment, they exchanged names; the gentleman's name was Mr. Alfred Oddy.

That evening, in the middle of a hilarious Chelsea party, Tommy suddenly discovered to his surprise that it would please him very much to see Mr. Oddy walk in through the door.

Although it was a hilarious party Tommy was not very happy; for one thing, Spencer Russell, the novelist, was there and showed quite clearly that he didn't think

Tommy very interesting. Tommy had been led up and introduced to him, had said one or two things that seemed to himself very striking, but Spencer Russell had turned his back almost at once and entered into eager conversation with somebody else.

This wasn't very pleasant, and then his own beloved Alice was behaving strangely; she seemed to have no eyes nor ears for anyone in the room save Spencer Russell, and this was the stranger in that only a week or so before she had in public condemned Spencer Russell's novels, utterly and completely, stating that he was written out, had nothing to say, and was as good as dead. To-night, however, he was not dead at all, and Tommy had the agony of observing her edge her way into the group surrounding him and then listen to him not only as though he were the fount of all wisdom, but an Adonis as well, which last was absurd seeing that he was fat and unwieldy and bald on the top of his head.

After a while Tommy came up to her and suggested that they should go, and received then the shock of his life when she told him that he could go if he liked, but that he was not to bother her. And she told him this in a voice so loud that everybody heard and many people tittered.

He left in a fury and spent then a night that he imagined to be sleepless, although in truth he slept during most of it.

It was with an eagerness that surprised himself that he met Mr. Oddy on the second occasion. He had not seen Alice for two days. He did not intend to be the one to apologise first; besides, he had nothing to apologise for; and yet during these two days there was scarcely a moment that he had not to restrain himself from running round to her studio and making it up.

When he met Mr. Oddy at the corner of Oakley Street he was a very miserable young man. He was so miserable that in five minutes he was pouring out all his woes.

He told Mr. Oddy everything, of his youth, his wonder-

ful promise, and the extraordinary lack of appreciation shown to him by his relatives, of the historical novels that he had written at the age of anything from ten to sixteen and found only the cook for an audience, of his going to Cambridge, and his extraordinary development there so that he became Editor of *The Lion*, that remarkable but very short-lived literary journal, and the President of *The Bats*, the most extraordinary Essay Club that Cambridge had ever known; of how, alas, he took only a third in History owing to the perverseness of examiners; and so on and so on, until he arrived in full flood at the whole history of his love for Alice, of her remarkable talents and beauty, but of her strange temper and arrogance and general feminine perverseness.

Mr. Oddy listened to it all in the kindest way. There's no knowing where they walked that afternoon; they crossed the bridge and adventured into Battersea Park, and finally had tea in a small shop smelling of stale buns and liquorice drops. It was only as they turned homewards that it occurred to Tommy that he had been talking during the whole afternoon. He had the grace to see that an apology was necessary.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' he said, flushing a little, 'I'm afraid I have bored you dreadfully. The fact is, that this last quarrel with Alice has upset me very badly. What would you do if you were in my position?'

Mr. Oddy sighed. 'The trouble is,' he said, 'that I realise only too clearly that I shall never be in your position again. My time for romance is over, or at least I get my romance now in other ways. It wasn't always so; there was a lady once beneath whose windows I stood night after night merely for the pleasure of seeing her candle outlined behind the blind.'

'And did she love you,' Tommy asked eagerly, 'as much as you loved her?'

'Nobody, my dear boy,' Mr. Oddy replied, 'loves you as

much as you love them; either they love you more or they love you less. The first of these is often boring, the second always tragic. In the present case I should go and make it up; after all, happiness is always worth having, even at the sacrifice of one's pride. She seems to me a very charming young lady.'

'Oh, she is,' Tommy answered eagerly. 'I'll take your advice, I'll go this very evening; in fact, if you don't mind, I think it would be rather a good time to find her in now.'

Mr. Oddy smiled and agreed; they parted to meet another day.

On the third occasion of their meeting, which was only two days after the second, Tommy cared for his companion enough to wish to find out something about him.

His scene of reconciliation with his beautiful Alice had not been as satisfactory as he had hoped; she had forgiven him, indeed, but given him quite clearly to understand that she would stand none of his nonsense either now or hereafter. The satisfactory thing would have been for Tommy there and then to have left her, never to see her again; he would thus have preserved both his pride and his independence; but, alas, he was in love, terribly in love, and her indignation made her appear only the more magnificent.

And so on this third meeting with his friend he was quite humble and longing for affection.

And then his curiosity was stirred. Who was this handsome old gentleman, with his touching desire for Tommy's companionship? There was an air about him that seemed to suggest that he was someone of importance in his own world; beyond this there was an odd sense that Tommy knew him in some way, had seen him somewhere; so on this third occasion Tommy came out with his questions.

Who was he? Was he married? What was his profession, or was he perhaps retired now? And another question that Tommy would have liked to have asked, and had not the

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impertinence, was as to why this so late interest in the Arts and combined with this interest this so complete ignorance? —

Mr. Oddy seemed to know a great deal about everything else, but in this one direction his questions were childish. He seemed never to have heard of the great Spencer Russell at all (which secretly gave Tommy immense satisfaction), and as for geniuses like Mumpus and Peter Arrogance and Samuel Bird, even when Tommy explained how truly great these men were, Mr. Oddy appeared but little impressed.

‘Well, at least,’ Tommy burst out indignantly, ‘I suppose you’ve read something by Henry Galleon? Of course he’s a back number now, at least he is not modern if you know what I mean, but then he’s been writing for centuries. Why, his first book came out when Trollope and George Eliot were still alive. Of course, between ourselves I think *The Roads*, for instance, a pretty fine book, but you should hear Spencer Russell go for it.’

No, Mr. Oddy had never heard of Henry Galleon.

But there followed a most enchanting description by Mr. Oddy of his life when he was a young man and how he once heard Dickens give a reading of *A Christmas Carol*, of how he saw an old lady in a sedan chair at Brighton (she was cracked, of course, and even then a hundred years after her time, but still he had seen it), of how London in his young day was as dark and dirty at night as it had been in Pepys’ time, of how crinolines when he was young were so large that it was one of the sights to see a lady getting into a cab, of how in the music-halls there was a chairman who used to sit on the stage with a table in front of him, ring a bell and drink out of a mug of beer, of how he heard Jean de Reszke in *Siegfried* and Ternina in *Tristan*, and of how he had been at the first night when Ellen Terry and Irving had delighted the world with *The Vicar of Wakefield*.

Yes, not only had Mr. Oddy seen and done all these things, but he related the events in so enchanting a way, drew such odd little pictures of such unexpected things and made that old London live so vividly, that at last Tommy burst out in a volley of genuine enthusiasm: 'Why, you ought to be a writer yourself! Why don't you write your reminiscences?'

But Mr. Oddy shook his head gently, there were too many reminiscences, everyone was always reminiscing; who wanted to hear these old men talk?

At last when they parted Mr. Oddy had a request—one thing above all things that he would like would be to attend one of these evening gatherings with his young friend to hear these young men and women talk. He promised to sit very quietly in a corner—he wouldn't be in anybody's way.

Of course Tommy consented to take him; there would be one next week, a really good one; but in his heart of hearts he was a little shy. He was shy not only for himself but also for his friend.

During these weeks a strange and most unexpected affection had grown up in his heart for this old man; he really did like him immensely, he was so kind and gentle and considerate.

But he would be rather out of place with Spencer Russell and the others; he would probably say something foolish, and then the others would laugh. They were on the whole a rather ruthless set and were no respecters of persons.

However, the meeting was arranged; the evening came and with it Mr. Oddy, looking just as he always did, quiet and gentle but rather impressive in some way or another. Tommy introduced him to his hostess, Miss Thelma Bennet, that well-known futuristic artist, and then carefully settled him down in a corner with Miss Bennet's aunt, an old lady who appeared occasionally on her niece's horizon

but gave no trouble because she was stone deaf and cared only for knitting.

It was a lively evening; several of the brighter spirits were there, and there was a great deal of excellent talk about literature. Every writer over thirty was completely condemned save for those few remaining who had passed eighty years of age and ceased to produce.

Spencer Russell especially was at his best; reputations went down before his vigorous fist like ninepins. He was so scornful that his brilliance was, as Alice Smith everywhere proclaimed, 'simply withering'. Everyone came in for his lash, and especially Henry Galleon. There had been some article in some ancient monthly written by some ancient idiot suggesting that there was still something to be said for Galleon and that he had rendered some service to English literature. How Russell pulled that article to pieces! He even found a volume of Galleon's among Miss Bennet's books, took it down from the shelf and read extracts aloud to the laughing derision of the assembled company.

Then an odd thing occurred. Tommy, who loved to be in the intellectual swim, nevertheless stood up and defended Galleon. He defended him rather feebly, it is true, speaking of him as though he were an old man ready for the almshouse who nevertheless deserved a little consideration and pity. He flushed as he spoke, and the scorn with which they greeted his defence altogether silenced him. It silenced him the more because Alice Smith was the most scornful of them all; she told him that he knew nothing and never would know anything, and she imitated his piping excited treble, and then everyone joined in.

How he hated this to happen before Mr. Oddy! How humiliating after all the things that he had told his friend, the implications that he was generally considered to be one of England's most interesting young men, the implica-

tion above all that although she might be a little rough to him at times Alice really adored him and was his warmest admirer. She did not apparently adore him to-night, and when he went out at last with Mr. Oddy into the wintry, rain-driven street it was all he could do to keep back tears of rage and indignation.

Mr. Oddy had, however, apparently enjoyed himself. He put his hand for a minute on the boy's shoulder.

'Good night, my dear boy,' he said. 'I thought it very gallant of you to stand up for that older writer as you did: that needed courage. I wonder,' he went on, 'whether you would allow me to come and take tea with you one day—just our two selves. It would be a great pleasure for me.'

And then, having received Tommy's invitation, he vanished into the darkness.

On the day appointed, Mr. Oddy appeared punctually at Tommy's rooms. That was not a very grand house in Glebe Place where Tommy lived, and a very soiled and battered landlady let Mr. Oddy in. He stumbled up the dark staircase that smelt of all the cabbage and all the beef and all the mutton ever consumed by lodgers between these walls, up again two flights of stairs, until at last there was the weather-beaten door with Tommy's visiting-card nailed upon it. Inside was Tommy, a plate with little cakes, raspberry jam, and some very black-looking toast.

Mr. Oddy, however, was appreciative of everything; especially he looked at the books. 'Why,' he said, 'you've got quite a number of the novels of that man you defended the other evening. I wonder you're not ashamed to have them if they're so out of date.'

'To tell you the truth,' said Tommy, speaking freely now that he was in his own castle, 'I like Henry Galleon awfully. I'm afraid I pose a good deal when I'm with those other men; perhaps you've noticed it yourself. Of course Galleon is the greatest novelist we've got, with

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Hardy and Meredith, only he's getting old, and everything that's old is out of favour with our set.'

'Naturally,' said Mr. Oddy, quite approving, 'of course it is.'

'I have got a photograph of Galleon,' said Tommy. 'I cut it out of a publisher's advertisement, but it was taken years ago.'

He went to his table, searched for a little and produced a small photograph of a very fierce-looking gentleman with a black beard.

'Dear me,' said Mr. Oddy, 'he does look alarming!'

'Oh, that's ever so old,' said Tommy. 'I expect he's mild and soft now, but he's a great man all the same; I'd like to see Spencer Russell write anything as fine as *The Roads* or *The Pattern in the Carpet*.'

They sat down to tea very happy and greatly pleased with one another.

'I do wish,' said Tommy, 'that you'd tell me something about yourself; we're such friends now, and I don't know anything about you at all.'

'I'd rather you didn't,' said Mr. Oddy. 'You'd find it so uninteresting if you did; mystery's a great thing.'

'Yes,' said Tommy, 'I don't want to seem impertinent, and of course if you don't want to tell me anything you needn't, but—I know it sounds silly, but, you see, I like you most awfully. I haven't liked anybody so much for ever so long, except Alice, of course. I don't feel as though you were of another generation or anything; it's just as though we were the same age!'

Mr. Oddy was enchanted. He put his hand on the boy's for a moment and was going to say something, when they were interrupted by a knock on the door, and the terrible-looking landlady appeared in the room. She apologised, but the afternoon post had come and she thought the young gentleman would like to see his letters. He took them, was about to put them down without opening them,

when suddenly he blushed. 'Oh, from Alice,' he said. 'Will you forgive me a moment?'

'Of course,' said Mr. Oddy.

The boy opened the letter and read it. It fell from his hand on to the table. He got up gropingly as though he could not see his way, and went to the window and stood there with his back to the room. There was a long silence.

'Not bad news, I hope,' said Mr. Oddy at last.

Tommy turned round. His face was grey and he was biting his lips. 'Yes,' he answered, 'she's—gone off.'

'Gone off?' said Mr. Oddy, rising from the table.

'Yes,' said Tommy, 'with Russell. They were married at a registry office this morning.'

He half turned round to the window, then put his hands as though he would shield himself from some blow, then crumpled up into a chair, his head falling between his arms on the table.

Mr. Oddy waited. At last he said: 'Oh, I'm sorry; that's dreadful for you!'

The boy struggled, trying to raise his head and speak, but the words would not come. Mr. Oddy went behind him and put his hands on his shoulders.

'You know,' he said, 'you mustn't mind me. Of course, I'll go if you like, but if you could think of me for a moment as your oldest friend, old enough to be your father, you know.'

Tommy clutched his sleeve, then, abandoning the struggle altogether, buried his head in Mr. Oddy's beautiful black waistcoat.

Later he poured his heart out. Alice was all that he had; he knew that he wasn't any good as a writer, he was a failure altogether; what he'd done he'd done for Alice, and now that she'd gone——

'Well, there's myself,' said Mr. Oddy. 'What I mean is that you're not without a friend; and as for writing, if you only write to please somebody else, that's no use; you've

got to write because you can't help it. There are too many writers in the world already for you to dare to add to their number unless you're simply compelled to. But there—I'm preaching. If it's any comfort to you to know, I went through just this same experience myself once—the lady whose candle I watched behind the blind. If you cared to, would you come and have dinner with me to-night at my home? Only the two of us, you know; but don't if you'd rather be alone.'

Tommy, clutching Mr. Oddy's hand, said he would come.

About half-past seven that evening he had beaten up his pride. Even in the depth of his misery he saw that they would never have got on together, he and Alice. He was quickly working himself into a fine state of hatred of the whole female race, and this helped him—he would be a bachelor all his days, a woman-hater; he would preserve a glorious independence. How much better this freedom than a houseful of children and a bagful of debts.

Only, as he walked to the address that Mr. Oddy had given him he held sharply away from him the memory of those hours that he had spent with Alice, those hours of their early friendship when the world had been so wonderful a place that it had seemed to be made entirely of golden sunlight. He felt that he was an old man indeed as he mounted the steps of Mr. Oddy's house.

It was a fine house in Eaton Square. Mr. Oddy must be rich. He rang the bell, and a door was opened by a footman. He asked for Mr. Oddy.

The footman hesitated a little, and then, smiling, said: 'Oh, yes, sir, will you come in?'

He left his coat in the fine hall, mounted a broad staircase, and then was shown into the finest library that he had ever seen. Books! Shelf upon shelf of books, and glorious books, editions de luxe and, as he could see with half an eye, rare first editions and those lovely bindings in

white parchment and vellum that he so longed one day himself to possess. On the broad writing-table there was a large photograph of Meredith; it was signed in sprawling letters, 'George Meredith, 1887.' What could this mean? Mr. Oddy, who knew nothing about literature, had been given a photograph by George Meredith and had this wonderful library! He stared bewildered about him.

A door at the far end of the library opened and an elegant young man appeared. 'Mr. Galleon,' he said, 'will be with you in a moment. Won't you sit down?'

Mr. Galleon! Henry Galleon! Instantly he saw it, remembered with horrid confusion his own ridiculous conceited talk, the abusive nonsense of Russell and the rest. 'My God!' he whispered aloud, 'what he must be thinking!'

The door opened again and Mr. Oddy appeared. Tommy Brown, his face crimson, stammered: 'It was a shame—if I'd only known!' and then, trying to stand up for himself, 'but I had that photograph and there was the beard.'

Mr. Oddy laughed. 'The beard went long ago,' he said; 'I suppose it *was* a shame, but I was hemmed in here in my castle; I had to find out what you young people were like. I get tired of all this sometimes; nobody tells me the truth here. I have to go to you and your friends for that.'

So they went down to dinner together.

Yes, this is an old story. Its principal interest, perhaps, is that it's true. I was, you see, myself Tommy Brown.

BY
H. G. WELLS



THE MAN WHO COULD
WORK MIRACLES

It is doubtful whether the gift was innate. For my own part, I think it came to him suddenly. Indeed, until he was thirty he was a sceptic, and did not believe in miraculous powers. And here, since it is the most convenient place, I must mention that he was a little man, and had eyes of a hot brown, very erect red hair, a moustache with ends that he twisted up, and freckles. His name was George McWhirter Fotheringay—not the sort of name by any means to lead to any expectation of miracles—and he was clerk at Gomshott's. He was greatly addicted to assertive argument. It was while he was asserting the impossibility of miracles that he had his first intimation of his extraordinary powers. This particular argument was being held in the bar of the Long Dragon, and Toddy Beamish was conducting the opposition by a monotonous but effective 'So *you* say', that drove Mr. Fotheringay to the very limit of his patience.

There were present, besides these two, a very dusty cyclist, landlord Cox, and Miss Maybridge, the perfectly respectable and rather portly barmaid of the Dragon. Miss Maybridge was standing with her back to Mr. Fotheringay, washing glasses; the others were watching him, more or less amused by the present ineffectiveness of

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the assertive method. Goaded by the Torres Vedras tactics of Mr. Beamish, Mr. Fotheringay determined to make an unusual rhetorical effort. 'Looky here, Mr. Beamish,' said Mr. Fotheringay. 'Let us clearly understand what a miracle is. It's something contrariwise to the course of nature done by power of Will, something what couldn't happen without being specially willed.'

'So *you* say,' said Mr. Beamish, repulsing him.

Mr. Fotheringay appealed to the cyclist, who had hitherto been a silent auditor, and received his assent—given with a hesitating cough and a glance at Mr. Beamish. The landlord would express no opinion, and Mr. Fotheringay, returning to Mr. Beamish, received the unexpected concession of a qualified assent to his definition of a miracle.

'For instance,' said Mr. Fotheringay, greatly encouraged. 'Here would be a miracle. That lamp, in the natural course of nature, couldn't burn like that upsy-down, could it, Beamish?'

'*You* say it couldn't,' said Beamish.

'And you?' said Fotheringay. 'You don't mean to say—eh?'

'No,' said Beamish reluctantly. 'No, it couldn't.'

'Very well,' said Mr. Fotheringay. 'Then here comes someone, as it might be me, along here, and stands as it might be here, and says to that lamp, as I might do, collecting all my will—"Turn upsy-down without breaking, and go on burning steady," and—Hullo!'

It was enough to make anyone say 'Hullo!' The impossible, the incredible, was visible to them all. The lamp hung inverted in the air, burning quietly with its flame pointing down. It was as solid, as indisputable as ever a lamp was, the prosaic common lamp of the Long Dragon bar.

Mr. Fotheringay stood with an extended forefinger and the knitted brows of one anticipating a catastrophic

smash. The cyclist, who was sitting next the lamp, ducked and jumped across the bar. Everybody jumped, more or less. Miss Maybridge turned and screamed. For nearly three seconds the lamp remained still. A faint cry of mental distress came from Mr. Fotheringay. 'I can't keep it up,' he said, 'any longer.' He staggered back, and the inverted lamp suddenly flared, fell against the corner of the bar, bounced aside, smashed upon the floor, and went out.

It was lucky it had a metal receiver, or the whole place would have been in a blaze. Mr. Cox was the first to speak, and his remark, shorn of needless excrescences, was to the effect that Fotheringay was a fool. Fotheringay was beyond disputing even so fundamental a proposition as that! He was astonished beyond measure at the thing that had occurred. The subsequent conversation threw absolutely no light on the matter so far as Fotheringay was concerned; the general opinion not only followed Mr. Cox very closely but very vehemently. Everyone accused Fotheringay of a silly trick, and presented him to himself as a foolish destroyer of comfort and security. His mind was in a tornado of perplexity, he was himself inclined to agree with them, and he made a remarkably ineffectual opposition to the proposal of his departure.

He went home flushed and heated, coat-collar crumpled, eyes smarting and ears red. He watched each of the ten street lamps nervously as he passed it. It was only when he found himself alone in his little bedroom in Church Row that he was able to grapple seriously with his memories of the occurrence, and ask, 'What on earth happened?'

He had removed his coat and boots, and was sitting on the bed with his hands in his pockets repeating the text of his defence for the seventeenth time, 'I didn't want the confounded thing to upset,' when it occurred to him that at the precise moment he had said the commanding words

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he had inadvertently willed the thing he said, and that when he had seen the lamp in the air he had felt that it depended on him to maintain it there without being clear how this was to be done. He had not a particularly complex mind, or he might have stuck for a time at that 'inadvertently willed', embracing, as it does, the abstrusest problems of voluntary action; but as it was, the idea came to him with a quite acceptable haziness. And from that, following, as I must admit, no clear logical path, he came to the test of experiment.

He pointed resolutely to his candle and collected his mind, though he felt he did a foolish thing. 'Be raised up,' he said. But in a second that feeling vanished. The candle was raised, hung in the air one giddy moment, and as Mr. Fotheringay gasped, fell with a smash on his toilet-table, leaving him in darkness save for the expiring glow of its wick.

For a time Mr. Fotheringay sat in the darkness, perfectly still. 'It did happen, after all,' he said. 'And 'ow I'm to explain it I *don't* know.' He sighed heavily, and began feeling in his pockets for a match. He could find none, and he rose and groped about the toilet-table. 'I wish I had a match,' he said. He resorted to his coat, and there were none there, and then it dawned upon him that miracles were possible even with matches. He extended a hand and scowled at it in the dark. 'Let there be a match in that hand,' he said. He felt some light object fall across his palm, and his fingers closed upon a match.

After several ineffectual attempts to light this, he discovered it was a safety-match. He threw it down, and then it occurred to him that he might have willed it lit. He did, and perceived it burning in the midst of his toilet-table mat. He caught it up hastily, and it went out. His perception of possibilities enlarged, and he felt for and replaced the candle in its candlestick. 'Here! *you* be lit,' said Mr. Fotheringay, and forthwith the candle was flaring,

and he saw a little black hole in the toilet-cover, with a wisp of smoke rising from it. For a time he stared from this to the little flame and back, and then looked up and met his own gaze in the looking glass. By this help he communed with himself in silence for a time.

'How about miracles now?' said Mr. Fotheringay at last, addressing his reflection.

The subsequent meditations of Mr. Fotheringay were of a severe but confused description. So far as he could see, it was a case of pure willing with him. The nature of his first experiences disinclined him for any further experiments except of the most cautious type. But he lifted a sheet of paper, and turned a glass of water pink and then green, and he created a snail, which he miraculously annihilated, and got himself a miraculous new tooth-brush. Somewhen in the small hours he had reached the fact that his will-power must be of a particularly rare and pungent quality, a fact of which he had certainly had inklings before, but no certain assurance. The scare and perplexity of his first discovery was now qualified by pride in this evidence of singularity and by vague intimations of advantage. He became aware that the church clock was striking one, and as it did not occur to him that his daily duties at Gomshott's might be miraculously dispensed with, he resumed undressing, in order to get to bed without further delay. As he struggled to get his shirt over his head, he was struck with a brilliant idea. 'Let me be in bed,' he said, and found himself so. 'Undressed,' he stipulated; and, finding the sheets cold, added hastily, 'and in my night-shirt—no, in a nice soft woollen nightshirt. Ah!' he said with immense enjoyment. 'And now let me be comfortably asleep. . . .'

He awoke at his usual hour and was pensive all through breakfast-time, wondering whether his overnight experience might not be a particularly vivid dream. At length his mind turned again to cautious experiments. For

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instance, he had three eggs for breakfast; two his landlady had supplied, good, but shoppy, and one was a delicious fresh goose-egg, laid, cooked, and served by his extraordinary will. He hurried off to Gomshott's in a state of profound but carefully concealed excitement, and only remembered the shell of the third egg when his landlady spoke of it that night. All day he could do no work because of this astonishingly new self-knowledge, but this caused him no inconvenience, because he made up for it miraculously in his last ten minutes.

As the day wore on his state of mind passed from wonder to elation, albeit the circumstances of his dismissal from the Long Dragon were still disagreeable to recall, and a garbled account of the matter that had reached his colleagues led to some badinage. It was evident he must be careful how he lifted frangible articles, but in other ways his gift promised more and more as he turned it over in his mind. He intended among other things to increase his personal property by unostentatious acts of creation. He called into existence a pair of very splendid diamond studs, and hastily annihilated them again as young Gomshott came across the counting-house to his desk. He was afraid young Gomshott might wonder how he had come by them. He saw quite clearly the gift required caution and watchfulness in its exercise, but so far as he could judge the difficulties attending its mastery would be no greater than those he had already faced in the study of cycling. It was that analogy, perhaps, quite as much as the feeling that he would be unwelcome in the Long Dragon, that drove him out after supper into the lane beyond the gas-works, to rehearse a few miracles in private.

There was possibly a certain want of originality in his attempts, for apart from his will-power Mr. Fotheringay was not a very exceptional man. The miracle of Moses' rod came to his mind, but the night was dark and unfavourable to the proper control of large miraculous

snakes. Then he recollected the story of 'Tannhäuser' that he had read on the back of the Philharmonic programme. That seemed to him singularly attractive and harmless. He stuck his walking-stick—a very nice Poona-Penang lawyer—into the turf that edged the footpath, and commanded the dry wood to blossom. The air was immediately full of the scent of roses, and by means of a match he saw for himself that this beautiful miracle was indeed accomplished. His satisfaction was ended by advancing footsteps. Afraid of a premature discovery of his powers, he addressed the blossoming stick hastily: 'Go back.' What he meant was 'Change back'; but of course he was confused. The stick receded at a considerable velocity, and incontinently came a cry of anger and a bad word from the approaching person. 'Who are you throwing brambles at, you fool?' cried a voice. 'That got me on the shin.'

'I'm sorry, old chap,' said Mr. Fotheringay, and then realising the awkward nature of the explanation, caught nervously at his moustache. He saw Winch, one of the three Immering constables, advancing.

'What d'yer mean by it?' asked the constable. 'Hullo! It's you, is it? The gent that broke the lamp at the Long Dragon!'

'I don't mean anything by it,' said Mr. Fotheringay. 'Nothing at all.'

'What d'yer do it for then?'

'Oh, bother!' said Mr. Fotheringay.

'Bother, indeed! D'yer know that stick hurt? What d'yer do it for, eh?'

For the moment Mr. Fotheringay could not think what he had done it for. His silence seemed to irritate Mr. Winch. 'You've been assaulting the police, young man, this time. That's what *you* done.'

'Look here, Mr. Winch,' said Mr. Fotheringay, annoyed and confused, 'I'm very sorry. The fact is——'

'Well?'

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He could think of no way but the truth. 'I was working a miracle.' He tried to speak in an off-hand way, but try as he would he couldn't.

'Working a——! 'Ere, don't you talk rot. Working a miracle, indeed! Miracle! Well, that's downright funny! Why, you's the chap that don't believe in miracles. . . . Fact is, this is another of your silly conjuring tricks—that's what this is. Now, I tell you——'

But Mr. Fotheringay never heard what Mr. Winch was going to tell him. He realised he had given himself away, flung his valuable secret to all the winds of heaven. A violent gust of irritation swept him to action. He turned on the constable swiftly and fiercely. 'Here,' he said, 'I've had enough of this, I have! I'll show you a silly conjuring trick, I will! Go to Hades! Go, now!'

He was alone!

Mr. Fotheringay performed no more miracles that night, nor did he trouble to see what had become of his flowering stick. He returned to the town, scared and very quiet, and went to his bedroom. 'Lord!' he said, 'it's a powerful gift—an extremely powerful gift. I didn't hardly mean as much as that. Not really. . . . I wonder what Hades is like?'

He sat on the bed taking off his boots. Struck by a happy thought he transferred the constable to San Francisco, and without any more interference with normal causation went soberly to bed. In the night he dreamt of the anger of Winch.

The next day Mr. Fotheringay heard two interesting items of news. Someone had planted a most beautiful climbing rose against the elder Mr. Gomshott's private house in the Lullaborough Road, and the river as far as Rawling's Mill was to be dragged for Constable Winch.

Mr. Fotheringay was abstracted and thoughtful all that day, and performed no miracles except certain provisions for Winch, and the miracle of completing his day's work

with punctual perfection in spite of all the bee-swarm of thoughts that hummed through his mind. And the extraordinary abstraction and meekness of his manner was remarked by several people, and made a matter for jesting. For the most part he was thinking of Winch.

On Sunday evenings he went to chapel, and oddly enough, Mr. Maydig, who took a certain interest in occult matters, preached about 'things that are not lawful'. Mr. Fotheringay was not a regular chapel goer, but the system of assertive scepticism, to which I have already alluded, was now very much shaken. The tenor of the sermon threw an entirely new light on these novel gifts, and he suddenly decided to consult Mr. Maydig immediately after the service. So soon as that was determined, he found himself wondering why he had not done so before.

Mr. Maydig, a lean, excitable man with quite remarkably long wrists and neck, was gratified at a request for a private conversation from a young man whose carelessness in religious matters was a subject for general remark in the town. After a few necessary delays, he conducted him to the study of the Manse, which was contiguous to the chapel, seated him comfortably, and, standing in front of a cheerful fire—his legs threw a Rhodian arch of shadow on the opposite wall—requested Mr. Fotheringay to state his business.

At first Mr. Fotheringay was a little abashed, and found some difficulty in opening the matter. 'You will scarcely believe me, Mr. Maydig, I am afraid'—and so forth for some time. He tried a question at last, and asked Mr. Maydig his opinion of miracles.

Mr. Maydig was still saying 'Well' in an extremely judicial tone, when Mr. Fotheringay interrupted again: 'You don't believe, I suppose, that some common sort of person—like myself, for instance—as it might be sitting here now, might have some sort of twist inside him that made him able to do things by his will.'

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‘It’s possible,’ said Mr. Maydig. ‘Something of the sort, perhaps, is possible.’

‘If I might make free with something here, I think I might show you by a sort of experiment,’ said Mr. Fotheringay. ‘Now, take that tobacco-jar on the table, for instance. What I want to know is whether what I am going to do with it is a miracle or not. Just half a minute, Mr. Maydig, please.’

He knitted his brows, pointed to the tobacco-jar and said: ‘Be a bowl of vi’lets.’

The tobacco-jar did as it was ordered.

Mr. Maydig started violently at the change, and stood looking from the thaumaturgist to the bowl of flowers. He said nothing. Presently he ventured to lean over the table and smell the violets; they were fresh-picked and very fine ones. Then he stared at Mr. Fotheringay again.

‘How did you do that?’ he asked.

Mr. Fotheringay pulled his moustache. ‘Just told it—and there you are. Is that a miracle, or is it black art, or what is it? And what do you think’s the matter with me? That’s what I want to ask.’

‘It’s a most extraordinary occurrence.’

‘And this day last week I knew no more that I could do things like that than you did. It came quite sudden. It’s something odd about my will, I suppose, and that’s as far as I can see.’

‘Is *that*—the only thing. Could you do other things besides that?’

‘Lord, yes!’ said Mr. Fotheringay. ‘Just anything.’ He thought, and suddenly recalled a conjuring entertainment he had seen. ‘Here!’ He pointed. ‘Change into a bowl of fish—no, not that—change into a glass bowl full of water with goldfish swimming in it. That’s better! You see that, Mr. Maydig?’

‘It’s astonishing. It’s incredible. You are either a most extraordinary . . . But no——’

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'I could change it into anything,' said Mr. Fotheringay. 'Just anything. Here! be a pigeon, will you?'

In another moment a blue pigeon was fluttering round the room and making Mr. Maydig duck every time it came near him. 'Stop there, will you,' said Mr. Fotheringay; and the pigeon hung motionless in the air. 'I could change it back to a bowl of flowers,' he said, and after replacing the pigeon on the table worked that miracle. 'I expect you will want your pipe in a bit,' he said, and restored the tobacco-jar.

Mr. Maydig had followed all these later changes in a sort of ejaculatory silence. He stared at Mr. Fotheringay and, in a very gingerly manner, picked up the tobacco-jar examined it, replaced it on the table. '*Well!*' was the only expression of his feelings.

'Now, after that it's easier to explain what I came about,' said Mr. Fotheringay; and proceeded to a lengthy and involved narrative of his strange experiences, beginning with the affair of the lamp in the Long Dragon and complicated by persistent allusions to Winch. As he went on, the transient pride Mr. Maydig's consternation had caused passed away; he became the very ordinary Mr. Fotheringay of everyday intercourse again. Mr. Maydig listened intently, the tobacco-jar in his hand, and his bearing changed also with the course of the narrative. Presently, while Mr. Fotheringay was dealing with the miracle of the third egg, the minister interrupted with a fluttering extended hand——

'It is possible,' he said. 'It is credible. It is amazing, of course, but it reconciles a number of difficulties. The power to work miracles is a gift—a peculiar quality like genius or second sight—hitherto it has come very rarely and to exceptional people. But in this case . . . I have always wondered at the miracles of Mahomet, and at Yogi's miracles, and the miracles of Madame Blavatsky. But, of course! Yes, it is simply a gift! It carries out so beautifully

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the arguments of that great thinker'—Mr. Maydig's voice sank—'his Grace the Duke of Argyll. Here we plumb some profounder law—deeper than the ordinary laws of nature. Yes—yes. Go on. Go on!'

Mr. Fotheringay proceeded to tell of his misadventure with Winch, and Mr. Maydig, no longer overawed or scared, began to jerk his limbs about and interject astonishment. 'It's this what troubled me most,' proceeded Mr. Fotheringay; 'it's this I'm most mijitly in want of advice for; of course he's at San Francisco—wherever San Francisco may be—but of course it's awkward for both of us, as you'll see, Mr. Maydig. I don't see how he can understand what has happened, and I dare say he's scared and exasperated something tremendous, and trying to get at me. I dare say he keeps on starting off to come here. I send him back, by a miracle, every few hours, when I think of it. And of course, that's a thing he won't be able to understand, and it's bound to annoy him; and, of course, if he takes a ticket every time it will cost him a lot of money. I done the best I could for him, but of course it's difficult for him to put himself in my place. I thought afterwards that his clothes might have got scorched, you know—if Hades is all it's supposed to be—before I shifted him. In that case I suppose they'd have locked him up in San Francisco. Of course I willed him a new suit of clothes on him directly I thought of it. But, you see, I'm already in a deuce of a tangle——'

Mr. Maydig looked serious. 'I see you are in a tangle. Yes, it's a difficult position. How you are to end it . . .' He became diffuse and inconclusive.

'However, we'll leave Winch for a little and discuss the larger question. I don't think this is a case of the black art or anything of the sort. I don't think there is any taint of criminality about it at all, Mr. Fotheringay—none whatever, unless you are suppressing material facts. No, it's miracles—pure miracles—miracles, if I may say so, of the

very highest class.'

He began to pace the hearthrug and gesticulate, while Mr. Fotheringay sat with his arm on the table and his head on his arm, looking worried. 'I don't see how I'm to manage about Winch,' he said.

'A gift of working miracles—apparently a very powerful gift,' said Mr. Maydig, 'will find a way about Winch—never fear. My dear Sir, you are a most important man—a man of the most astonishing possibilities. As evidence, for example! And in other ways, the things you may do . . .'

'Yes, *I've* thought of a thing or two,' said Mr. Fotheringay. 'But—some of the things came a bit twisty. You saw that fish at first? Wrong sort of bowl and wrong sort of fish. And I thought I'd ask someone.'

'A proper course,' said Mr. Maydig, 'a very proper course—altogether the proper course.' He stopped and looked at Mr. Fotheringay. 'It's practically an unlimited gift. Let us test your powers, for instance. If they really *are* . . . If they really are all they seem to be.'

And so, incredible as it may seem, in the study of the little house behind the Congregational Chapel, on the evening of Sunday, Nov. 10, 1896, Mr. Fotheringay, egged on and inspired by Mr. Maydig, began to work miracles. The reader's attention is specially and definitely called to the date. He will object, probably has already objected, that certain points in this story are improbable, that if any things of the sort already described had indeed occurred, they would have been in all the papers a year ago. The details immediately following he will find particularly hard to accept, because among other things they involve the conclusion that he or she, the reader in question, must have been killed in a violent and unprecedented manner more than a year ago. Now a miracle is nothing if not improbable, and as a matter of fact the reader *was* killed in a violent and unprecedented manner a year ago. In the subsequent course of this story that will become perfectly

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clear and credible, as every right-minded and reasonable reader will admit. But this is not the place for the end of the story, being but little beyond the hither side of the middle. And at first the miracles worked by Mr. Fotheringay were timid little miracles—little things with the cups and parlour fitments, as feeble as the miracles of Theosophists, and, feeble as they were, they were received with awe by his collaborator. He would have preferred to settle the Winch business out of hand, but Mr. Maydig would not let him. But after they had worked a dozen of these domestic trivialities, their sense of power grew, their imagination began to show signs of stimulation, and their ambition enlarged. Their first larger enterprise was due to hunger and the negligence of Mrs. Minchin, Mr. Maydig's housekeeper. The meal to which the minister conducted Mr. Fotheringay was certainly ill-laid and uninviting as refreshment for two industrious miracle-workers; but they were seated, and Mr. Maydig was descanting in sorrow rather than in anger upon his house-keeper's shortcomings, before it occurred to Mr. Fotheringay that an opportunity lay before him. 'Don't you think, Mr. Maydig,' he said, 'if it isn't a liberty, I——'

'My dear Mr. Fotheringay! Of course! No—I didn't think.'

Mr. Fotheringay waved his hand. 'What shall we have?' he said, in a large, inclusive spirit, and, at Mr. Maydig's order, revised the supper very thoroughly. 'As for me,' he said, eyeing Mr. Maydig's selection, 'I am always particularly fond of a tankard of stout and a nice Welsh rarebit, and I'll order that. I ain't much given to Burgundy,' and forthwith stout and Welsh rarebit promptly appeared at his command. They sat long at their supper, talking like equals, as Mr. Fotheringay presently perceived with a glow of surprise and gratification, of all the miracles they would presently do. 'And, by the bye, Mr. Maydig,' said

Mr. Fotheringay, 'I might perhaps be able to help you—in a domestic way.'

'Don't quite follow,' said Mr. Maydig, pouring out a glass of miraculous old Burgundy.

Mr. Fotheringay helped himself to a second Welsh rare-bit out of vacancy, and took a mouthful. 'I was thinking,' he said, 'I might be able (*chum, chum*) to work (*chum, chum*) a miracle with Mrs. Minchin (*chum, chum*)—make her a better woman.'

Mr. Maydig put down the glass and looked doubtful. 'She's—She strongly objects to interference, you know, Mr. Fotheringay. And—as a matter of fact—it's well past eleven and she's probably in bed and asleep. Do you think, on the whole——'

Mr. Fotheringay considered these objections. 'I don't see that it shouldn't be done in her sleep.'

For a time Mr. Maydig opposed the idea, and then he yielded. Mr. Fotheringay issued his orders, and a little less at their ease, perhaps, the two gentlemen proceeded with their repast. Mr. Maydig was enlarging on the changes he might expect in his housekeeper next day, with an optimism that seemed even to Mr. Fotheringay's supper senses a little forced and hectic, when a series of confused noises from upstairs began. Their eyes exchanged interrogations, and Mr. Maydig left the room hastily. Mr. Fotheringay heard him calling up to his housekeeper and then his footsteps going softly up to her.

In a minute or so the minister returned, his step light, his face radiant. 'Wonderful!' he said, 'and touching! Most touching!'

He began pacing the hearthrug. 'A repentance—a most touching repentance—through the crack of the door. Poor woman! A most wonderful change! She had got up. She must have got up at once. She had got up out of her sleep to smash a private bottle of brandy in her box. And to confess it too! . . . But this gives us—it opens—a most

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amazing vista of possibilities. If we can work this miraculous change in *her* . . .'

'The thing's unlimited seemingly,' said Mr. Fotheringay. 'And about Mr. Winch——'

'Altogether unlimited.' And from the hearthrug Mr. Maydig, waving the Winch difficulty aside, unfolded a series of wonderful proposals—proposals he invented as he went along.

Now what those proposals were does not concern the essentials of this story. Suffice it that they were designed in a spirit of infinite benevolence, the sort of benevolence that used to be called post-prandial. Suffice it, too, that the problem of Winch remained unsolved. Nor is it necessary to describe how far that series got to its fulfilment. There were astonishing changes. The small hours found Mr. Maydig and Mr. Fotheringay careering across the chilly market-square under the still moon, in a sort of ecstasy of thaumaturgy, Mr. Maydig all flap and gesture, Mr. Fotheringay short and bristling, and no longer abashed at his greatness. They had reformed every drunkard in the Parliamentary division, changed all the beer and alcohol to water (Mr. Maydig had over-ruled Mr. Fotheringay on this point), they had, further, greatly improved the railway communication of the place, drained Flinder's swamp, improved the soil of One Tree Hill, and cured the Vicar's wart. And they were going to see what could be done with the injured pier at South Bridge. 'The place,' gasped Mr. Maydig, 'won't be the same place to-morrow. How surprised and thankful everyone will be!' And just at that moment the church clock struck three.

'I say,' said Mr. Fotheringay, 'that's three o'clock! I must be getting back. I've got to be at business by eight. And besides, Mrs. Wimms——'

'We're only beginning,' said Mr. Maydig, full of the sweetness of unlimited power. 'We're only beginn-

ing. 'Think of all the good we're doing. When people wake——'

'But——' said Mr. Fotheringay.

Mr. Maydig gripped his arm suddenly. His eyes were bright and wild. 'My dear chap,' he said, 'there's no hurry. Look'—he pointed to the moon at the zenith—'Joshua!'

'Joshua?' said Mr. Fotheringay.

'Joshua,' said Mr. Maydig. 'Why not? Stop it.'

Mr. Fotheringay looked at the moon.

'That's a bit tall,' he said after a pause.

'Why not?' said Mr. Maydig. 'Of course it doesn't stop. You stop the rotation of the earth, you know. Time stops. It isn't as if we were doing harm.'

'H'm!' said Mr. Fotheringay. 'Well.' He sighed. 'I'll try. Here——'

He buttoned up his jacket and addressed himself to the habitable globe, with as good an assumption of confidence as lay in his power. 'Jest stop rotating, will you,' said Mr. Fotheringay.

Incontinently he was flying head over heels through the air at the rate of dozens of miles a minute. In spite of the innumerable circles he was describing per second, he thought; for thought is wonderful—sometimes as sluggish as flowing pitch, sometimes as instantaneous as light. He thought in a second, and willed. 'Let me come down safe and sound. Whatever else happens, let me down safe and sound.'

He willed it only just in time, for his clothes, heated by his rapid flight through the air, were already beginning to singe. He came down with a forcible, but by no means injurious bump in what appeared to be a mound of fresh-turned earth. A large mass of metal and masonry, extraordinarily like the clock-tower in the middle of the market square, hit the earth near him, ricocheted over him, and flew into stonework, bricks, and masonry, like a bursting

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bomb. A hurtling cow hit one of the larger blocks and smashed like an egg. There was a crash that made all the most violent crashes of his past life seem like the sound of falling dust and this was followed by a descending series of lesser crashes. A vast wind roared throughout earth and heaven, so that he could scarcely lift his head to look. For a while he was too breathless and astonished even to see where he was or what had happened. And his first movement was to feel his head and reassure himself that his streaming hair was still his own.

‘Lord!’ gasped Mr. Fotheringay, scarce able to speak for the gale, ‘I’ve had a squeak! What’s gone wrong? Storms and thunder. And only a minute ago a fine night. It’s Maydig set me on to this sort of thing. *What* a wind! If I go on fooling in this way I’m bound to have a thundering accident! . . .

‘Where’s Maydig?’

‘What a confounded mess everything’s in!’

He looked about him so far as his flapping jacket would permit. The appearance of things was really extremely strange. ‘The sky’s all right anyhow,’ said Mr. Fotheringay. ‘And that’s about all that is all right. And even there it looks like a terrific gale coming up. But there’s the moon overhead. Just as it was just now. Bright as mid-day. But as for the rest—— Where’s the village? Where’s—where’s anything? And what on earth set this wind a-blowing? *I* didn’t order no wind.’

Mr. Fotheringay struggled to get to his feet in vain, and after one failure, remained on all fours, holding on. He surveyed the moonlit world to leeward, with the tails of his jacket streaming over his head. ‘There’s something seriously wrong,’ said Mr. Fotheringay. ‘And what it is—goodness knows.’

Far and wide nothing was visible in the white glare through the haze of dust that drove before a screaming gale but tumbled masses of earth and heaps of inchoate

ruins, no trees, no houses, no familiar shapes, only a wilderness of disorder vanishing at last into the darkness beneath the whirling columns and streamers, the lightnings and thunderings of a swiftly rising storm. Near him in the livid glare was something that might once have been an elm-tree, a smashed mass of splinters, shivered from boughs to base, and further a twisted mass of iron girders—only too evidently the viaduct—rose out of the piled confusion.

You see, when Mr. Fotheringay had arrested the rotation of the solid globe, he had made no stipulation concerning the trifling movables upon its surface. And the earth spins so fast that the surface at its equator is travelling at rather more than a thousand miles an hour, and in these latitudes at more than half that pace. So that the village, and Mr. Maydig, and Mr. Fotheringay, and everybody and everything had been jerked violently forward at about nine miles per second—that is to say, much more violently than if they had been fired out of a cannon. And every human being, every living creature, every house, and every tree—all the world as we know it—had been so jerked and smashed and utterly destroyed. That was all.

These things Mr. Fotheringay did not, of course, fully appreciate. But he perceived that his miracle had miscarried, and with that a great disgust of miracles came upon him. He was in darkness now, for the clouds had swept together and blotted out his momentary glimpse of the moon, and the air was full of fitful struggling tortured wraiths of hail. A great roaring of wind and waters filled earth and sky, and, peering under his hand through the dust and sleet to windward, he saw by the play of the lightnings a vast wall of water pouring towards him.

‘Maydig!’ screamed Mr. Fotheringay’s feeble voice amid the elemental uproar. ‘Here!—Maydig!’

‘Stop!’ cried Mr. Fotheringay to the advancing water. ‘Oh, for goodness’ sake, stop!’

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'Just a moment,' said Mr. Fotheringay to the lightnings and thunder. 'Stop jest a moment while I collect my thoughts. . . . And now what shall I do?' he said. 'What *shall* I do? Lord! I wish Maydig was about.'

'I know,' said Mr. Fotheringay. 'And for goodness' sake let's have it right *this* time.'

He remained on all fours, leaning against the wind, very intent to have everything right.

'Ah!' he said. 'Let nothing what I'm going to order happen until I say "Off!" . . . Lord! I wish I'd thought of that before!'

He lifted his little voice against the whirlwind, shouting louder and louder in the vain desire to hear himself speak. 'Now then!—here goes! Mind about that what I said just now. In the first place, when all I've got to say is done, let me lose my miraculous power, let my will become just like anybody else's will, and all these dangerous miracles be stopped. I don't like them. I'd rather I didn't work 'em. Ever so much. That's the first thing. And the second is—let me be back just before the miracles begin; let everything be just as it was before that blessed lamp turned up. It's a big job, but it's the last. Have you got it? No more miracles, everything as it was—me back in the Long Dragon just before I drank my half-pint. That's it! Yes.'

He dug his fingers into the mould, closed his eyes, and said 'Off!'

Everything became perfectly still. He perceived that he was standing erect.

'So *you* say,' said a voice.

He opened his eyes. He was in the bar of the Long Dragon, arguing about miracles with Toddy Beamish. He had a vague sense of some great thing forgotten that instantaneously passed. You see, except for the loss of his miraculous powers, everything was back as it had been; his mind and memory therefore were now just as they had

been at the time when this story began. So that he knew absolutely nothing of all that is told here, knows nothing of all that is told here to this day. And among other things, of course, he still did not believe in miracles.

'I tell you that miracles, properly speaking, can't possibly happen,' he said, 'whatever you like to hold. And I'm prepared to prove it up to the hilt.'

'That's what *you* think,' said Toddy Beamish, and 'Prove it if you can.'

'Looky here, Mr. Beamish,' said Mr. Fotheringay. 'Let us clearly understand what a miracle is. It's something contrariwise to the course of nature done by power of Will. . . .'

BY

P. C. WREN



THE DOUBLE SADDLE

CAPTAIN ZARLES of the Foreign Legion was undeniably a very fine soldier, an admirable regimental officer, and worthy of the great regiment that he adorned. When he sent him to the Military College at St. Maixent to study for his commission, Colonel des Voeux had prophesied that they would undoubtedly make an officer of Sergeant-Major Zarles—but not a gentleman. However, brave, zealous and experienced officers were of more importance than gentlemen, and the Legion's Mess would soon give him the necessary veneer.

Captain Zarles lived for his work, and nothing else interested him greatly. Women, a little; wine and absinthe, a little; practical cruelty, a little. At the moment, the camel question occupied his keen and active mind, almost to the exclusion of his present form of relaxation, the baiting of his wife, and of *le légionnaire* the ci-devant Vicomte Michel Valmond de la Roche St. Michel.

Something, he felt, could be done to improve the already high efficiency of the various *pelotons* of the Camel Corps, those splendid hardy *méharistes* who go out on desert patrol for months on end, preventing or punishing Touareg raids, convoying the big caravans, and generally rendering the Sahara safe for plutocracy, if a duller country for heroes to live in. Also of the *groupes mobiles*

and desert columns on their work of peaceful penetration.

And his great idea in this connection was the invention and introduction of a new and improved camel-saddle, a saddle with two seats, in short. Why, the Zarles saddle would mark an absolutely enormous step in the progress of the equipment of the XIXth Army Corps, the army of Africa. Where one hundred men arrived to-day, two hundred men would arrive to-morrow—seated on the Zarles saddles—and at no greater cost in camels and the feeding and watering of camels. That it could be done, Captain Zarles was certain, for he had visited India on his way home from a tour of duty in French Indo-China, and had seen two men riding in comfort on one camel. He had at once made personal experiment and, in one day, had ridden seventy miles across sand and stone, carrying a gun across his thighs, behind a sturdy camelman who drove the beast by means of rope-reins fastened to its nostrils. And the camel had also carried the camp-kit of Captain Zarles and had finished the journey without the slightest signs of fatigue.

The zealous officer had made a careful sketch of the two-seated contraption.

And, this bright and shining morn, Captain Zarles stood eyeing the bony wooden frame of a Touareg saddle with its high-crutched pommel and narrow back-board crupper, comparing it unfavourably with the type represented by the sketch in his note-book. Yes, surely the Arab was wrong and the Baluchi was right. Both used the same species of camel, the dromedary, and in similar country. Yet how should the Arab be wrong in the light of five thousand years' experience? On the other hand, why should the Baluchi be wrong? Presumably the Asiatic had used the single-humped dromedary just as long as the African had, and his practical conclusion—the two-seated saddle—is as much entitled to respect.

Anyhow, Captain Zarles would have a two-seated

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saddle-frame constructed at once, and he would himself experiment therewith, giving it the fullest trial, and possibly modifying and improving it. Yes, and this dog Monsieur le Vicomte Michel Valmond de la Roche St. Michel should be his camel-man, his *oont-wallah*, as they called the man in the Indian deserts. Quite a promotion for *ce bon sacré chien d'un Vicomte* to be groom to a camel.

And Captain Zarles proceeded to carry out his great idea, of evolving the Regulation Sealed-pattern Zarles' Two-seated Military Camel Saddle—to his undoing and terrible death.

As some students of history are aware, there was a Valmond de la Roche St. Michel with Roland at Ronceval, and there have, of course, been Valmonds de la Roche St. Michel in the *entourages* of most of the kings and queens of France. Their bannerets have been seen in Jerusalem, at Acre, Rhodes, Malta and wherever new pages of French history were written in steel and stone.

The Valmond de la Roche St. Michel of the French Revolution weathered the storm, thanks partly to his courage, ability and stoutness of heart, and partly to his and his family's great popularity throughout the countryside.

Paris graciously allowed him to live and even to retain his château and a small portion of the family lands. The reduced and declining family received further blows during the troublous Napoleonic times—and paid a heavy price for its haughty aristocracy and unbending royalism.

By the time the Michel Valmond de la Roche St. Michel of this story was born, his father was a country gentleman of modest means, with little left to him of his family possessions but its pride, traditions and dilapidated château, the decaying roof of which he literally kept over him with difficulty.

Thus it was that the latest, and indeed the last, of the

Valmonds learned, at an early age, that he must take his profession seriously; though, among the many things that he disliked, work of all kinds was prominent. What he did like was to lead, as far as possible, the kind of life lived by his ancestors, to hunt, to feast, to carouse, to gamble, to enjoy every *droit de seigneur*, and for a change of dissipation, to visit the gay capital. . . .

Within the shadow of the château, at the foot of the hill that it crowned and adorned, crouched humbly the village of St. Michel, and in the village dwelt Monsieur Farge, butcher, a politically-minded man, gross, violent and of most subversive views. With him dwelt, more or less in amity, Madame Farge, the female of the species, a scheming and evil woman, more dangerous than her noisier lord. And beneath their roof, when not elsewhere, sojourned their really beautiful daughter Angelique, in whom mingled and flourished the distinctive virtues of her parents.

At the sign of the *Coque d'Or* she exercised and exploited her charm, and charms; and did that very ancient hostelry much good. Financially speaking, that is to say.

The name and the fame of la Belle Angelique, her reputation—or, as some jealous detractors said, her lack of it—had spread far beyond St. Michel and the parts adjacent. She was, indeed, what was once termed a 'toast', a 'reigning belle', and the *Coque d'Or*, especially on market days, was a place of pilgrimage. Men fought about her; women talked about her; and Madame Farge, to whose side she, more or less, nightly returned, thought about her—long, long thoughts that somehow ended in a château—in fact, *the* Château de la Roche St. Michel. On their way thither, these fond maternal thoughts halted and hovered about the head of one Etienne Zarles, and, as they did so, Madame might be heard to curse, and, indeed, seen to spit.

For *ce sale cochon d'un Etienne Zarles*—and might the Devil eviscerate him, impale him on a red-hot stake, and grill

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him over a slow fire till he looked like a nicely-browned *poussin*—dared to raise his sheep's eyes, his pig's eyes, his eyes of a hairless green goat, to la Belle Angelique!

And the hell of it was, Madame freely admitted, that the fool girl was by way of catching the eye that was raised—the bold buccaneering, come-hither eye of this rollicking rascal, this village *vaurien*. But there, girls would be girls, and Angelique was a good girl, and would never give her mother a moment's anxiety. Never would she jeopardise her chances of becoming a fine lady by stooping to folly before she was one. Afterwards was another matter.

The subject being raised in family council, Angelique concurred. Certainly, *ce bon* Etienne Zarles was a fine figure of a man. But Michel Valmond de la Roche St. Michel was a fine figure of a Bank Balance. And undoubtedly, he was aware of Mademoiselle Angelique Farge.

'Nibbling, eh?' grunted the butcher.

'*Il en est bien épris,*' stated Madame Farge.

'With the most dishonourable intentions,' blushed Mademoiselle modestly. 'Monsieur le Vicomte comes into the *Coque d'Or* almost nightly. . . . Not a reticent or shy young gentleman, that one. . . . He says just what he thinks—just what he likes. . . . Fortunately he does not think much.'

'And I am what he likes—for the moment,' added Angelique.

'And that penniless *canaille*, Etienne Zarles, is he there also nightly? Does he likewise say what he likes?' enquired Madame.

'*Oh! la, la!*' blushed Angelique. '*Ce pauvre Etienne. . . .*'

When Lieutenant le Vicomte Valmond de la Roche St. Michel, of the 46th Infantry of the Line, came home on furlough and married Angelique Farge, it was a great and terrible surprise to the dwellers on the hill, but to the dwellers of the Plain it was not unexpected.

It would, they had said all along, take something much more like a man than Monsieur le Vicomte to defeat or evade Monsieur and Madame Farge when betrayed into their hands by their little daughter Angelique.

Monsieur le Vicomte never forgot his treatment by the butcher Farge on the night when he was trapped by that forceful ruffian and his wife; and, for the rest of his days he detested his papa-in-law nearly as much as he did the presumptuously insolent young scoundrel, Private Etienne Zarles, of the 46th Infantry of the Line, who had dared to be his rival for the favours of this Angelique, his madly-loved and bitterly hated wife, this vixen who could raise him up to Heaven and dash him down to Hell, and who could and did make his life a garden of bliss and a desert of jealous torment.

Private Etienne Zarles! That one should learn something.

And to the best of his rather limited ability, Monsieur le Vicomte taught Etienne Zarles something. Self-control, for example, and how to refrain from smashing the sneering, jeering face of the man who put him on the rack of humiliation, jealousy and mental torture. For Lieutenant le Vicomte Michel Valmond de la Roche St. Michel had the, for him, bright idea of making Etienne Zarles his *ordonnance*, and promoted him to be his soldier-valet, body-servant, butler and general factotum.

It gave the good Vicomte very genuine pleasure to say 'Fill Madame's glass, Zarles', and to note carefully whether the hand of Private Etienne Zarles trembled as he did so. And to address him as oaf, lout, clod, bumpkin or fish-faced, flat-footed fool.

Or to bid him stand further away from Madame—as, apparently, neither his leisure time was equal to his need for ablutions, nor his income to the purchase of perfume—and to watch the dull flush overspread the sullen countenance of the young man.

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The Vicomte exercised much ingenuity in contriving that Etienne Zarles should see a great deal of Madame—in her husband's presence—and that he should appear at the very greatest disadvantage.

And Madame la Vicomtesse? Madame accepted the situation, and everything else that Madame could get, including the whole of her husband's income. . . .

After a brief and passionate honeymoon, trouble had begun quite early, and there was little need of Monsieur le Vicomte's bitter, cutting tongue, and Madame's utter incompatibility and hopeless unfitness for her rôle, to widen the inevitable breach. Within a year of the wedding he had observed with some justice:

'Your idea of existence is to spend all day, and to gamble all night.'

To which she had replied, with equal truth:

'The shops are shut at night, my cabbage.'

An annoying woman. When her infuriated and outraged husband would cry:

'You'll come to a bad end,' she, with a feline smile, and flexing of tense fingers, would coldly reply:

'And you, my cabbage, have come to a bad beginning.'

When he would groan, 'You have ruined me,' she would reply:

'Not yet, quite, my little one, be patient.'

And the kindest thing that Angelique ever did for her husband, was to leave him, having faithfully kept her promise that she would never desert him while he had a franc.

Lieutenant le Vicomte Michel Valmond de la Roche St. Michel, instead of returning thanks to Heaven for his good fortune, raved like a maniac, and threatened murder and suicide.

It was Private Etienne Zarles, just returned from furlough at St. Michel, who was to be murdered, and that forthwith, unless he instantly confessed his share in the

shameful business of Madame's flight, presumably to St. Michel. And it was Etienne Zarles who neatly recorded the general estimate of Madame's character, by shrugging his shoulders and mentioning that his income from all sources amounted to about sixpence a day.

So the murder of Etienne Zarles was postponed, and a violent slap on each cheek substituted. The suicide of Monsieur le Vicomte was also postponed, and a deeper plunge into even wilder dissipation substituted for that. But dissipation of the kind enjoyed by such gentlemen of rank and fashion is apt to be expensive, and a week of it cost a sum greater than the income of the Vicomte for a year.

After the manner of his kind, the Lieutenant turned first to the gentlemen who lend money; then to the green tables which sometimes return it; then to the horses that run quickly, though sometimes not quickly enough; and finally to various regimental funds that were in his trust.

And, still after the manner of his kind, he came the early and inevitable cropper, and, in ruin and disgrace, fled to escape prosecution.

Private Etienne Zarles, returning to regimental duty from the misery and martyrdom of his experience in this domestic ménage, quickly found himself. Before long he found himself a Corporal and, again before long, a Sergeant. For he was a born soldier.

As such, he not unnaturally longed to see active service, and as there was apparently no hope of his doing this as a Sergeant of the 46th Regiment of the Line, he showed the mettle of his pastures by taking the bold and extreme course of throwing away all he had gained by his soldierly virtue, deserting from his regiment, and enlisting, as a Belgian without papers, at a far-distant recruiting dépôt of the Foreign Legion.

In the Foreign Legion, Etienne Zarles again found himself, and was justified of his boldness in this apparently

over-rash step. He distinguished himself as a steady, keen and competent soldier, cheerful, willing, zealous and smart—and in addition to these qualities, he had invaluable knowledge of ‘the ropes’. None so skilful as he at the legitimate kind of ‘creeping’, the propitiation of superiors, and the avoidance of every kind of offence.

Le légionnaire Etienne Zarles became Corporal Zarles in less than due course; Corporal Zarles was promoted to Sergeant for distinguished coolness and courage in action; Sergeant Zarles was promoted to Sergeant-Major for the brave, skilful and tenacious defence of an outpost after the death of his officer, and *l’Adjutant* Zarles was sent to the Military College of St. Maixent to be trained to fitness for commissioned rank.

It was during a furlough spent at St. Michel that Captain Etienne Zarles of the Foreign Legion again met Angelique, *née* Farge. The Captain, more of a fine figure of a man than ever, took the high hand. He also took, within a week, the hand of Angelique, more than a little weary of life in the minor key, and the village of St. Michel. Nor had Monsieur and Madame Farge any objection to make to their daughter’s alliance *en secondes noces* with *Monsieur le Capitaine*. Not that it would have interested Captain Etienne Zarles if they had.

‘I treat ’em rough,’ was the Captain’s motto and method, whether with reference to women, subordinates, civilians or parents-in-law.

The happy couple spoke quite frequently and freely of the bride’s first husband, and when, on one occasion, Madame Angelique Zarles remarked, ‘I suppose that account of his death, in the paper, was true’, her Etienne cryptically replied.

‘It’ll soon be true enough, if it turns out not to be true.’

‘You mean, my darling,’ replied Angelique, ‘that if it ever turned out that he was still alive, you would—er——’

'Precisely, thou crystal dew-drop. I would,' her Etienne assured her.

But he did not. *Au contraire*, as the French say.

Madame Zarles was far from unpopular with the officers of the Battalion, for she was a beautiful and extremely lively young woman, and beautiful and lively young women are all too rare in those places where units of the Legion are stationed.

It could not be said that she was exactly popular with the wives of the married officers, but, then, beautiful and lively young women of the type of Angelique Zarles rarely are. Nor could it be said that she was a refining and softening influence in their rough and lonely lives, nor that her presence made for that peace, concord and harmony that should distinguish an Officers' Mess.

The Colonel was a great admirer of Madame, her professed cavalier.

Major Meurice, albeit a married man, made no secret of his conviction that the Colonel would be better employed in looking after the affairs of the regiment; and no less than four Captains, who agreed on no other point, agreed that Major Meurice was an old fool, whose wife should beat him more often than she did.

As for Angelique's lieutenants and *sous-lieutenants*, save for one or two with private means, these were as nothing in her sight, and less than nothing when out of her sight.

It is therefore, perhaps, unnecessary to affirm that life was distinctly thrilling for La Belle Angelique, and that she trod with delight a mazy primrose path of dalliance, a path on which no danger lurked, save that of the wrath of Captain Zarles.

However, that was quite danger enough, for Angelique, by this time, would have been the last to contradict her husband when he remarked that he treated 'em rough.

Should it ever occur, and *le bon Dieu* forbid, that Captain Zarles came unexpectedly round the corner at one of

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the sudden turns on the mazy primrose path of dalliance, there would be real trouble. No heroics and high falutin'; no talk of broken hearts or broken vows; no threats of divorce; nor any of the usual reactions of lesser men.

Not a bit of it.

Just a dog-whip—bless him—and about the biggest thrashing that ever a man bestowed upon a woman. As for the 'shadowy third', he would be a shadow indeed, by the time her Etienne had done with him—a shadow on the banks of the Styx.

Life was truly thrilling, and there was really no need for the final and crowning thrill which Etienne produced one morning after inspection of a new draft just arrived from Sidi-bel-Abbès, and posted to his Company.

'I'm making a small domestic change, thou daughter of all delights, and mother of none,' he growled, as he flung belts and sword, képi and gloves on to the sofa of their tiny room. 'A new servant, a new male housemaid . . . parlour-maid . . . lady's-maid. . . .'

'How truly interesting,' sneered Madame.

'I positively think you'll find it so, *ma gosse*,' grinned her lord malevolently.

Nor did Madame contradict, for a terrible idea struck her dumb.

Clad in the ill-fitting fatigue uniform of a private soldier of the Legion, her first, and indeed her only, husband, Monsieur le Vicomte Michel Valmond de la Roche St. Michel entered the room and, kneeling, removed her husband's dusty boots.

'The new servant, my dear,' smiled Captain Zarles. 'A clumsy lout, I fear. Something of an oaf, a lump, a clod, a bumpkin. . . . Indeed, as you see, rather what one might call a fish-faced, flat-footed fool—but willing, very willing, and I'm sure he'll do his best to give satisfaction. . . .'

'And if he doesn't, we won't return him to store, we'll train him, my dear, *train* him, eh? . . .'

And Etienne Zarles proceeded to train Michel Valmond very much in the way in which Michel Valmond had trained Etienne Zarles.

And he 'treated him rough,' very much more roughly, if less skilfully, than he had himself been treated.

It gave the good Captain very genuine pleasure to say, 'Fill Madame's glass, Valmond', and to note carefully whether the hand of *le légionnaire* Michel Valmond trembled as he did so, and to address him as 'clumsy oaf', 'wretched lout', 'miserable clod', or indeed as 'escaped gaol-bird'.

Nor did he forget to bid the *sale cochon* stand further away from Madame, as he waited at table, inasmuch as that high-bred lady was of delicate olfactory perception.

And sometimes the high-bred lady was not of over-delicate oral performance, when Captain Zarles baited the husband and wife together, as was sometimes his humour; for he was not the man to forgive slights, insults and injuries, nor to forget that Angelique Farge had been content enough with himself and his genuine, if rough and passionate love, before Monsieur le Vicomte Valmond de la Roche St. Michel came upon the scene.

So life became yet more piquant and thrilling to La Belle Angelique, now that her husband was her domestic servant, and her bigamous spouse their sardonic watchful tyrant.

Oh! la! la! What with a husband, a proprietor, a brace of lovers and a dozen aspirants, what was a girl to do?

Oh these soldiers, the dear things—senior ranks, professional lovers; juniors, enthusiastic amateurs.

Not being a maiden all unwary—though fresh from a lady's seminary (of a kind)—when she married Captain Zarles, La Belle Angelique contrived to play with fire without getting burnt—or beaten—though the pastime rendered life almost too exciting.

One of the most intriguing aspects of her complicated

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life, was the behaviour of her lawful husband and housemaid *le légionnaire* Michel Valmond.

She had known him—better, probably, than anybody, including his own mother—as a haughty, arrogant and wilful young man; passionate, dissipated and spoilt; proud, sensitive and weak. She beheld him now as the model soldier-servant, and also a human automaton, insensitive, devoid of pride and self-respect, invulnerable to insult, incapable of resenting anything, from a slight to a blow.

And yet, was there something about him of the air of one who waits with inexhaustible patience, one who bides his time with colossal self-control?

La Belle Angelique had naturally never read or heard of that modest gentleman who proclaimed that his head, though bloody, was unbowed, and that he was captain of his soul.

Had she done so, it is conceivable that her husband *le légionnaire* Michel Valmond, might have reminded her of this indomitable man.

For it could not be said that, while treating him rough, and indeed, very rough, Captain Zarles got what is colloquially termed ‘much change’ out of his victim.

His hand did not shake as he poured the wine for Madame. His face did not flush with rage or shame when humiliations were heaped upon him in her presence. The bitterest and most savage insult called forth no answering frown, no sudden gleam or flash of undisciplined eye.

No, it had to be admitted that the man bore the terrible and indeed unparalleled situation in which he found himself, with an astounding stoicism.

‘*Mon Dieu!*’ decided Madame, ‘but that one has been through it! . . . Prison, I suppose. . . . Possibly “the dry guillotine” . . . Poor devil!’

And, with unexpected insight or intuition, she added:

'Too proud to show a sign of pride. . . .'

When, partly in pity, partly in curiosity, and largely because it was her nature to, La Belle Angelique, laying aside her role of Madame, attempted to adopt that of Mistress, it quickly transpired that the sinner had become a saint, and far more resembled the saint Joseph, than the St. Michel she had known.

And to add to the slighted lady's savage wrath, her husband, addressing her as Madame Potiphar, flatly refused to believe the tale she told him.

She was trying to insult *him*, Etienne Zarles, he said; and if she tried again, she would succeed—in getting a sound beating.

Oh, an incomprehensible delightful surprise-packet who could keep a woman guessing, this dear Etienne. Not one of these useful fools a woman could twist round her little finger, bless him.

As a camel-driver and camel-master, *le légionnaire* Michel Valmond gave complete satisfaction to Captain Zarles. It could not be said that he showed the least intelligent interest in the perfection of the Zarles two-seated military saddle, but he certainly took an interest in the welfare of the splendid *mehara* riding-camel, and in mapping the desert routes, visible and invisible, within a hundred miles radius of Zabat.

When brother officers occasionally asked Captain Zarles why he didn't have an Arab orderly to look after his camel and accompany him on his long rides, he would say that he preferred the companionship of a white man, and that this was a good lad whom he was training and whom he liked to have about him.

He sometimes mentioned that he knew the fellow's family at home, and had promised to keep an eye on him.

In point of fact, Captain Zarles never more enjoyed this wonderful situation, devised by Fate, than when he sat at his ease in the comfortable rear seat of the saddle, while

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this anointed dog of an aristocrat crouched in front of him and drove.

It was Captain Zarles' playful humour to indicate that he would fain go to the right by violently pulling the driver's right ear, and similarly with regard to the left. Should he desire an acceleration of pace, he would administer a painful prod with the muzzle of his automatic, and his favourite way of stopping the camel was to clutch its driver by the scruff of his neck, and to squeeze hard with powerful thumb and fingers.

Even Captain Zarles himself sometimes marvelled at what this broken-down gaolbird would bear without sign of remonstrance or resentment.

One of Captain Zarles' many boasts was that he could sleep while he marched. Many soldiers can do this—if a condition of mental blankness and lethargy amounting to inability to receive and record sense-impressions, can be called sleep—the eyes of the body open, those of the mind tight shut; a state of somnambulism, in fact.

Undoubtedly he could sleep on horse-back, in brief snatches, actually closing the eyes; and, with feet well thrust home in shortened stirrups, knees wedged beneath holsters, and hands holding the saddle pommel as well as the reins, leave the subconscious mind to maintain the balance of the unconscious body.

As for the comfortable padded seat of his camel-saddle, deep and broad, with its high-cushioned back-rest, Captain Zarles could sleep in that as though in his arm-chair at home. With feet in stirrups, arms folded, and nothing to do but just comfortably sit, and with nothing to look at but the back of *le légionnaire* Michel Valmond, the blue sky and the yellow sand, it was indeed sometimes very difficult to keep awake.

Occasionally Captain Zarles even had a suspicion that the man in front of him was very much more than half asleep, as his body sagged slackly, leaning against the high

padding peak of the front seat, swaying gently from side to side with the motion of the camel as it jogged steadily along at the ambling trot with which it covered eleven kilometres every hour.

On the return journey from a desert expedition, the driver might well have slept without fear of consequences, for the camel would, in any case, go straight as a ruled line to the place where food and rest awaited it beneath the dusty trees of Captain Zarles' compound.

But *le légionnaire* Michel Valmond did not sleep.

Rather, he watched and waited, watched and sought, and one day, seeking with untiring eye, found what he wanted. His master being apparently asleep, he, greatly daring, turned round and looked at him. His eyes confirming what his ears had heard, he then made a dangerous experiment; and for the first time in months, perhaps in years, he smiled.

Captain Zarles rose to his feet, brushed sand from his riding-breeches, strode forth from the shadow of the palm beneath which he had lunched, and climbed into the rear seat of the saddle of his kneeling camel.

Having adjusted the Captain's stirrups to his boots, *le légionnaire* Michel Valmond saluted, seized nose-rein and stick, sprang into the front seat, brought the camel to its feet, and started it off on its forty kilometre journey to Zabat.

Before very long, certain rhythmical sounds indicated that Captain Zarles was exercising his boasted powers of sleeping in the saddle. Doubtless the outward journey, begun before dawn, the labours of map-making, a long and sporting stalk on foot, gun in hand, a late hilarious party overnight, and a bottle of *pinard* with his *déjeuner* of roll and meat, had combined to give Captain Zarles that after-lunch feeling to an unwonted degree.

Monsieur le Vicomte Michel Valmond de la Roche St. Michel knew that his hour had come, and he straightened

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himself on the saddle, squared his shoulders and once again smiled. Also, he very gently and unobtrusively introduced to the notice of the admirable racing-camel the long, thin stick that he carried. Not, of course, by anything so violent and vulgar as a blow, but merely by holding it where the camel could see it, and occasionally swinging it forward as he rode.

The camel, who could take a hint, increased his pace imperceptibly, and did so each time the stick swung forward. Before long, without jolt or jerk or change of step, the beast was going at top speed and its driver was gently putting increasing pressure on its left rein. . . .

With a yell of alarm, Captain Zarles was suddenly hurled from his seat, flung from an ugly nightmare of uneasy sleep into a far more terrible nightmare of waking reality.

What in the name of God was this! What had happened? . . . He was on the ground. . . . There was no ground. . . . He was in water. . . . There was no water.

What——?

Captain Zarles struggled to rise and found no foothold. His legs, his whole body, his arms, were held as in a giant hand. Rather, a giant mouth was sucking him down and down, swallowing him alive.

Ceasing his wild struggle, he gazed for a moment at a writhing, heaving, seething mass of sand and water where the struggling camel fought against its dreadful death.

Turning his head, the only part of his body that he could now move, he glared wildly round—and encountered the mocking smile of Michel Valmond.

'Help! Help!' bawled Captain Zarles.

'There is no help,' smiled Michel Valmond.

'I'm sinking! I'm sinking!' shrieked Zarles.

'You are, indeed,' replied Valmond. *'And so am I. . . . We are both sinking. . . . You, being considerably the heavier, will sink first, and I shall have the ineffable pleasure of seeing you do so. . . . Now pull yourself to—'*

gether, my good Zarles, and though you have not lived like a gentleman, try to die like one.'

'*Help me!*' screamed Zarles.

'But, my good animal, I brought you here. I, rather neatly, if I may say so, placed you exactly where you are.'

Zarles struggled violently and sank the deeper.

'Good,' observed Valmond, who, motionless, his arms spread abroad with palms extended flat, was sinking imperceptibly.

'You will certainly die before I do.'

'*Help!*' screamed Zarles again.

'And I thought you were such a very, very brave man, Zarles!' mused Valmond. 'Come, come; if you can neither live nor die like a gentleman, die like a man at any rate. Positively, the poor camel made a better showing. He didn't cry for help, and I deeply regret that the nobler beast had to be involved in your fate.'

Again the agonised man turned his despairing eyes to the unanswering skies and screamed for help.

'Really, Zarles, what an infernal row! You deafen one. But it will not be for long. In a very few minutes there will be complete silence here, and all that will be left of the great and noisy Zarles will be—a bubble.

'Think of it. The last sound, just the quiet bursting of a bubble.

'The great Zarles' suitable epitaph—a bubble upon sand.

'Yes—the bubble "Zarles" is about to burst.

'And I shall see it, Zarles. It will be the last thing that I shall see, and I can think of no sight more agreeable . . .'

The dying man threw back his head and shrieked again as the wet sand touched his chin.

'*Help! Help!*' he screamed.

'No good, my poor Zarles,' observed Valmond. 'If a wandering Arab heard you and came, he could do nothing—except sit and gloat. . . . You wouldn't like that, would you? *You*, the relentless scourge of the Bad Bedou

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and the Treacherous Targui to be seen and heard squealing like a stuck pig? That would never do, surely . . .’

Zarles, his eyes almost starting from his head, glared wildly at his terrible mocker.

‘But, I confess,’ continued the latter, ‘that I wish La Belle Angelique could be here. Her reaction to the situation would be very interesting. What do you think it would be?’

Again Zarles, with his remaining strength, struggled feebly and bawled for help.

‘Personally, I think she would laugh at us both,’ continued Valmond. ‘Laugh heartily and say “*Oh! La! La! Ce pauvre Etienne et ce pauvre Michel. In the soup together, this time!*” . . . Yes . . . And if she had a rope and a camel, to which of us would she throw that rope, Zarles? I wonder. To you probably . . .’

‘Yes! Yes!’ shouted Zarles, who appeared to be insane with fear. ‘She will throw it to *me*.’

‘I think she would,’ Valmond went on, ‘because you have a franc where I have a centime.’

‘But when we all three meet in that happy Hell where there is no money,’ he added, ‘I somehow fancy things will be different . . . for the Devil is a gentleman of ancient family and will understand a gentleman. And Angelique, another devil, will then prefer me—as she did before, my good Zarles, as she did before. . . .’

Zarles strove to speak, but only ‘the bubbling cry of some strong swimmer in his agony’ resulted, as sand and water entered his mouth.

‘G . . . g . . . r . . . r . . . r . . .’ a terrible sound floated for a second above the hideous and sinister quiverings of the quicksand, as the face of Etienne Zarles disappeared beneath its surface.

A bubble formed and broke.

Monsieur le Vicomte Michel Valmond de la Roche St. Michel smiled.

BY
I. A. R. WYLIE



GRANDMOTHER BERNLE
LEARNS HER LETTERS

EVERYONE was indignant. Even the Burghermeister, who was fond of saying, 'Na—it isn't as bad as all that', or 'To-morrow is also a day', gave his considered opinion that a country that wouldn't take Grandmother Bernle on her own merits was no good, and that she had much better stay where she had been born. He even put on his shabby top-hat and official *Frack* to go and tell her so, but afterwards he seemed to have changed his mind and said that 'We must have patience with one another', in his usual kindly, rather anxious manner.

So nobody protested any more, and it was settled that Grandmother Bernle was to go as soon as she had learnt her letters; and everyone took a hand.

Naturally the schoolmaster was the chief personage in the affair. After school hours he sat with her and was very solemn and painstaking like a doctor with a difficult case. And when he came out, the neighbours would ask anxiously how things were getting on, and sometimes he would shake his head in gloomy silence, and at others he would rub his hands and call out, 'Not bad—not bad at all. To-day we reached "M" without a mistake.' And before you could count ten the news had travelled all over the village.

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When Grandmother Bernle had actually reached 'Z', a sigh of relief went up, as though the patient had passed the crisis and might be expected to live. Grandmother Bernle herself was so exhausted with the strain that she stayed in bed—a thing that had never happened in her life before—and forgot to bake her weekly *Honigkuchen*.

So that when the children came, as they always did, on Saturday afternoon, there was nothing for them. And Grandmother Bernle, with tears in her eyes, offered to say her alphabet to them instead. Which was not half as nice. For the children, who were always hungry and liked Grandmother Bernle's *Honigkuchen* better than anything else in the world, were terribly educated and had known their alphabet for years.

You might have expected that the people would have grumbled about Grandmother Bernle's *Honigkuchen*. After all, she couldn't afford luxuries. She was very poor, like everyone else in the village, and it was silly of her to go without food herself in order to feed a horde of other people's children.

But the fact was that once upon a time Grandmother Bernle had baked for her own four boys; and even during the war she had kept on and every Saturday had made up three small parcels—Fritz, the youngest, had gone to America long since—and had sent them to the Front. One by one the parcels had grown fewer, and there came a day when there was no need to send any at all. But on Saturday Grandmother Bernle, who hadn't cried or complained—in fact, had done nothing but grow suddenly very old—baked as usual and called in the neighbours' white-faced solemn children, who were too stupefied with the wonder of it even to say 'thank you'.

And, oddly enough, the villagers, who were a stolid, ordinary people, understood, and whatever else happened, they saw to it that Grandmother Bernle was able to make her *Honigkuchen*. They couldn't have explained themselves

or Grandmother Bernle if they had tried. But some of them had lost their own children, and they knew all they needed to know.

Even when the rumour came that young Fritz Bernle had come back to fight against his own people the meanest village scandalmonger was silent. And now that she was to join him it was agreed that she ought to go.

True, it was an incredible journey, and Grandmother Bernle was old—sixty-five at least, which is a great age when one has borne four children and worked all the summer's days on the barren mountain-sides and gone short of food through the bitter winters. Even if one is still tough and strong—as Grandmother undoubtedly was—one looked old like a gnarled tree that has weathered years of tempest.

And besides, she was going among people who couldn't even speak her language and who had been—if you cared to remember it—enemies. Not that the village laid much stress on the latter point. Let bygones be bygones, as the Burghermeister said. Life was hard enough without digging up old troubles.

Still, it was a risky business. And Heaven knew there were plenty of risks if you stayed where God put you. The Burghermeister said so.

On the other hand, it was natural that a mother should wish to end her days with her only son and her son's wife, and above all with her grandchild. It was true that she had never seen the grandchild or the wife either. For young Fritz had run away when he was eighteen, and for years no one had heard of him.

Then at last a letter came. The Burghermeister had read it aloud to Franz Bernle and his wife—Franz was alive in these days—and everyone in the village knew that young Fritz had done well by himself. He was working in a tobacconist's store, earning a princely income, and was already married; there was actually a

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baby. He sent photographs. Nobody recognised him, but his appearance beside the tall young lady with the feather in her large hat caused a revolution in the village dress, and for months afterwards the one store did a great business in high, stiff collars and very spotted ties.

Even Grandmother Bernle—for she was a grandmother now—hadn't recognised him. But she had recognised the baby who, in spite of the strange, elaborate dress, was the image of Fritz himself when he had been very small. (And he had always been her favourite.) The photographs were nailed under the crucifix in the *Wohnstube*, and to her neighbours she would let fall casual references to 'my grandson in America', and even spoke of America itself with mysterious pursings of her sunken lips.

Yes, it was an extraordinary country. You grew fabulously rich by just going there, and once you were there anything might happen. You might become President. Certainly Baby Fritz might (the child had been christened James Henry, but Grandmother Bernle knew better).

And then the war came and there were no more letters, and presently there was nothing left to Grandmother Bernle but the photos under the crucifix and her silent thoughts.

No one knew what she thought in those days, for she had grown very silent. People almost forgot the surviving son in America. Or they were kind enough not to mention it. It was terrible to have a son in a country which did such wicked things to the poor, sorely-tried Fatherland, and Grandmother Bernle had enough to bear.

But the Burghermeister knew of one letter that Grandmother Bernle had written. It was after the death of the third boy on the Somme, and she had dictated it to him—a very simple letter. The Burghermeister never mentioned it to anyone, but after that he came to see

her every day and at Christmas brought her his best smoked ham.

But at last the war rolled on, like an exhausted wave, leaving a trail of wreckage, and Fritz Bernle wrote an answer—a queer letter in the queerest German, as though he had forgotten his mother tongue.

He said he was grieved about his brothers, but that he was richer than ever and had bought the tobacco store. And he thought that unless his mother had other plans she had better join him. James Henry had taken a prize at school and was going to college. And he enclosed money for the journey and papers that Grandmother Bernle was to read and sign.

Which showed how much he had forgotten. Because Grandmother Bernle couldn't read or sign anything.

The Burghermeister never told anyone, save the schoolmaster (who was a *Verein's* friend) what Grandmother Bernle had said to him on that solemn occasion when he had visited her in his *Frack* and high-hat. As a matter of fact, there wasn't much to tell. The Burghermeister himself had been quite frank. He had sat there under the ham hanging from the low, smoke-blackened ceiling and spoken his mind.

'It's a long, long journey, *liebe* Frau Bernle; you wouldn't think of going to Berlin—now, would you? Na, it's further than that. You go on a great ship, and I have been told by reliable people that one does not so much as see land for ten days. You can imagine that if the ship sinks—as it often does—you haven't a chance—not a hope in the world. Then, if you do get there, you will be amongst strangers; most of them won't understand a word you say. Their ways will be peculiar and disagreeable. You are not so young any more. It is true, perhaps, that I do not want you to go—I am not young myself, and as one grows older there are not many left to care for——'

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He became aware that she wasn't listening as the *Frack* and high-hat demanded that a citizen should listen. She sat opposite him in her wooden armchair, and her eyes were fixed on the row of photographs and especially on the photograph of the amazing baby in the outlandish clothes. Her own eyes were like a child's—very blue, very innocent and wondering, as though they were beginning to see again the queer things that children see. And she told the Burghermeister that before she died she must find her son Fritz.

'But——' said the Burghermeister sadly, '——perhaps you won't find him. He has been gone twenty years——'

'I am thinking of the other Fritz,' she explained—'the little Fritz——'

'If you mean this James Henry——'

'I call him Fritz,' she interrupted. 'He *is* Fritz. You see I remember him quite well when he was born——'

After that the Burghermeister didn't protest any more. And he and the schoolmaster sat up at nights and read documents and swore oaths and signed declarations till their heads ached. And the schoolmaster grew grey with anxiety because Grandmother Bernle could never recognise the word '*Freiheit*' when she saw it. And it was a word—so the schoolmaster understood—about which the Americans were most peculiarly particular.

However, by this time she could read most words of two syllables, if she wasn't flustered, and soon afterwards the villagers put up a triumphal arch near the station with '*Gott segne dich*' and '*Glück auf*', and some old flags which ought to have gone to Paris and hadn't.

All the villagers were there, including the children, who wore their First Communion clothes and looked very solemn and depressed, as well they might. Grandmother Bernle herself walked between the Burghermeister and the schoolmaster, and behind them came the store-

keeper with two wicker baskets tied with cords and several paper parcels full of *Schinken* and *Eier Brötchen* for the journey. (For you never knew what kind of food they'd give you.) Behind him marched the band, all young men in their highest collars and spottiest ties, who played '*Heil dir im Siegeskranz*', which was the only tune they could be sure of playing without accidents.

It was a warm spring day, but Grandmother Bernle had put on all her shawls and petticoats like a knight arming himself against the world, so that there was very little to be seen of her but the small, wizened face and the sunken blue eyes with their look of wonderment.

The train was only a local which would join up with the great mysterious express further down the valley; and as Grandmother Bernle, with labels and tickets festooned all over her and her canvas purse sewn into the nethermost petticoat, climbed aboard, other villagers put their heads out and cheered. Grandmother Bernle's own people couldn't cheer. She had been with them all their lives—not noticed very much, but always there—a part of their memories. And somehow in her patience and courage she had been like a flag flying from their little isolated fortress.

And now she was going, taking the old people's past with her. And the young people were sorrowful too, thinking of their future and of the land of promise whither Grandmother Bernle was going.

So that they could only wave their handkerchiefs, and the band made throaty noises, and the schoolmaster said loudly and rather pompously:

'Remember to say "Thank you" and "If you please". Then they will think you can speak English and are a very educated person——'

But it was the Burghermeister who said the last word. He walked beside her carriage window after the train had begun to move, his round, good-natured face very

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red, as though he were going to cry, and the high-hat squeezed all out of shape.

‘Remember you can never be far from God, *liebe Frau Bernle*,’ he said simply.

And these were the words Frau Bernle did remember. She held them very close as the last familiar face flashed out of sight, and closer still when the grey Atlantic rolled between her and the land, and she knew that she would never see her mountains or her home again.

II

It had been one of those impulses against which no one can defend himself. You can be reckoned the hardest head in your particular line of business—as Fritz Bernle was—and then something happens, and for long enough to make a mess of your whole life you lose your judgment. . . .

Even so it might have been all right if he hadn’t found that darned old letter. At the worst he would have sent money. The letter wasn’t even opened. The envelope with the sloping, painstaking writing was covered with strange postmarks showing how the poor thing had wandered hither and thither, beating its way through the entanglements of war till it reached him.

He remembered how little welcome it had been—his own shame and terror when he had found it jammed in his letter-box. Wasn’t it bad enough to have a name like his and have people stare at him with a hostile curiosity when he opened his mouth? Wasn’t he a hundred per cent. like the best of them in every other respect, and hadn’t he proved it? Hadn’t he given more than he could afford to the Red Cross? Hadn’t he said over and over again very loudly that he’d like to hang the Kaiser with his own hands? And it was true. He hadn’t a drop of feeling for his native land. Not a drop.

Why should he? It had done nothing for him. He

wanted to forget it. He had forgotten it, and, in spite of his name and his accent, he was making other people forget it too. His tobacco store was the most popular on the Avenue.

Of course he owed a lot to Annabel, who was the real goods. Her grandpeople had been in the '49 crowd—real pioneer stock. It was like having a princess in the family. And she knew it. When the war came along she had made him feel it.

They had been terribly in love with each other until then, and it wasn't that they had ever quarrelled. But he began to feel how ashamed she was of him, and that had made him secretly humble and outwardly aggressive. He would talk more and more loudly about 'what he would do', and wore a button with 'Treat 'em rough' printed on it in his button-hole, and inside was miserable and small like a bragging schoolboy who is afraid nobody believes him.

And Annabel grew cool and aloof. She said perverse things just to worry and shame him. She guessed there was something to be said for both sides and didn't take much stock of all that atrocity stuff. She guessed people were mostly just people. Of course, *she* could get away with it. Everyone knew who she was, and liked her. He had to admit that she had done wonders for them all by just being what she was . . . calm, poised, dead sure of herself.

But it had hurt. . . .

James Henry had helped too. He took after his mother's people, and was lithe and loose-limbed, and wore his peaked cap over one eye, and knew every baseball player's average from Babe Ruth down to the veriest rookie in the lowest club in the Second League. A reg'lar feller. A reg'lar American. Just to have him stand in the store with his hands in his pockets and hear him say 'Yep . . . you betcher life' in his broadest Broadway accent was to bask in a reflected glory.

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But Fritz Bernle was short and stout, and there were words he could never get quite right. And that hurt too.

Still, all things considered, he hadn't done badly. He had, as it seemed, weathered the storm when that letter had come. The very sight of the writing had turned him sick and faint like a blow over the heart. It was as though a hand had stretched itself out of the past, clutching at him.

James Henry, looking up from breakfast, had asked, 'What's bitten you, Pop?' And Fritz Bernle had thrust the cruel thing in his pocket and with a casual 'Just some darned old bill, Sonny,' had left the room.

No, he hadn't even opened it. He hadn't dared. He had forgotten, and wasn't going to remember. Everything he had—his wife, his son, his business—was here. They'd got to let him go—those ghosts of his youth . . . they'd got to leave him alone.

But he hadn't torn the letter up, either. It was as though the invisible hand that wasn't strong enough to hold him any longer, laid itself, humble and appealing, over his.

The Bernles lived on Sixth Avenue in a four-roomed apartment that looked straight on to the tracks of the Elevated. Anybody in the train who happened to have an interest in the Bernle's domestic life, could catch intimate, if fleeting, glimpses of it as he thundered past; and the noise, at intervals, was like that of the approaching end of the world.

But the Bernles didn't mind. They liked seeing people themselves, and silence would have worried them.

And the place was convenient—just over the store—and cheap. It made it possible for them to have a car—a real eight-cylindered balloon-tyred affair . . . none of your rattle-bang flivvers. And on Sunday, Fritz Bernle, with a very large cigar thrust in the corner of his mouth, would take the family out to the Log Cabin and drink

very soft drinks and come back at the rate of ten miles an hour, boiling and sweating in a three-deep queue of other pleasure-seekers.

In the winter they queued up for one of the popular movies, or if Annabel took it into her head that it was time for James Henry to imbibe culture they bought tickets at Greys for one of the highbrow shows.

And one day in the year, when it was so hot the pavement shimmered and the bed-clothes seemed to have become sheets of flame, they queued up for Coney and caught a breath of freshness as they raced, shrieking and clinging to one another, down the Thunderbolt.

Not that James Henry shrieked. Owing to his age he was nonchalant and superior. He guessed there wasn't much kick left in those old things, and that when he was grown up he was going to build something that went straight up and down for a mile. He only came along because he guessed Pop and Mom liked it. . . . They seemed sort of happier if he was around.

Once, when Fritz had been made manager, they went further afield, right out to 'The Port of Missing Men', and ate a three-dollar lunch with the large air of having done that sort of thing all their lives. And afterwards Fritz had sat on the porch overlooking the rolling hills and gleaming streaks of water, his sight blurred with a pride that somehow wasn't easy . . . that made him want to hurt and shoulder people out of his way.

And that very night, grinning to himself, he had written home and sent the photographs and told all these poor sims back there just what Fritz Bernle had made of himself. He imagined how they would sit up and rub their eyes.

The years had gone by and he hadn't thought of them again until the letter came. And in a day or two he had forgotten that too. He wasn't the brooding kind, and, anyhow, he was too busy making money so that James

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Henry should go to college when the time came. His son wasn't going to keep no tobacco store. You could bet your life on that.

Queer how it happened. It had been Sunday—a lovely day in April. Annabel and James Henry had gone over to Nyack to visit Annabel's mother. They often went—particularly on the Sundays when Fritz couldn't get away, almost as though they did it on purpose to be rid of him. After lunch he had taken an hour off, and in his shirt-sleeves, lapped round in a sea of Sunday Supplement, had drifted off into a doze.

He hadn't been worrying. A bit hurt, perhaps. A bit lonely. A bit more aware than usual that married life wasn't all you thought it when you started out. Or perhaps the snack lunch at the drug store hadn't agreed with him. But on the whole everything was O.K.—fine. He was making money fast. They couldn't despise him if he did that.

He hadn't really fallen asleep. Through a maze of disjointed thoughts he had heard the Elevated come and go like a receding tide of loose metal. He had smelt the faint, familiar smell of gasoline wafted in through the open window.

Then something had happened. Perhaps it was the spring—that queer change of the blood that is like a wistful renewal of youth. He had been remembering a time when Annabel had been different—when she had thought him a fine fellow.

And then suddenly—it was as though he had blundered out unexpectedly into a familiar pathway . . . he had seen tall, dark-clad mountains ahead of him and heard the wind sighing through the pine trees and the long grass. He had smelt resin and burning wood, and the smoke of it had stung his eyes. A low, blackened ceiling had closed down on him, and in the twilight of a little room, so close to the very source of his life that it was like

the innermost recess of his own heart, a clock ticked loudly and solemnly. He had heard voices—clear, boyish voices—and then somebody had called him by name and he had sprung up as though he had been shot, stammering, ‘*Jawohl—komme gleich, Mutterle!*’ And had found himself standing there—a stout, middle-aged man, in his shirt-sleeves, trembling in a New York sunshine.

He had laughed. He had lit a cigar. But a door had opened he couldn’t close any more. He had said aloud, ‘Maybe I’ll haf a look at that new Pickford movie’. But he hadn’t gone.

He had even rung up Annabel, but her astonished voice had only added to his uneasiness. He couldn’t tell her what was the matter. He didn’t know. And he had hung up in the middle of her questioning. He hadn’t even said good-bye. He knew now that she had become a total stranger. He knew that she didn’t love him. Her voice, cold and impatient, divorced from her calm, smiling presence, had told him. She didn’t care what became of him. No one cared. He might fall down dead. They’d be upset—but they wouldn’t be really unhappy. Maybe they’d be glad. They’d always been ashamed of him. . . . He had no one—no one in the whole world.

Presently, like a frightened child seeking home, he had gone to his bureau and rooted round till he had found the old unopened letter and opened it.

And then the whole thing had fallen upon him in its full strength. It had torn his heart. It had seemed literally to knock his life all to pieces. Nothing of all he had could shield him. His three brothers dead . . . and he hadn’t even written. The hard, bitter winters up there in the remembered mountains. . . . His little, old mother who had made *Honigkuchen* for them all when she herself had gone without bread . . . and out of his own plenty he had given nothing—worse than nothing. He

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had boasted—thrown his boasts like stones at her and gone his way.

And she was so old. He tried to reckon up. Even when he had been a little boy she had seemed incredibly old. And now if she were dead——

He hadn't given himself time to think. With his cigar hanging from his quivering mouth, the tears on his round cheeks, he had written home a second time. He had groped, blundering, for the forgotten words.

He had explained to Annabel that they had been cut off, and Annabel had teased him with her cool good-humour. She said she guessed he had been drinking, and he had grinned sheepishly. He had meant to tell her the truth, to say in a strong, assured voice, 'My mother is coming home to us'. But the very sight of her had sobered him.

He loved her. He was terribly proud of her. But he knew now that she didn't love him and that she was ashamed. And there had always been something about her that had frightened him—her good looks, her trim, smart clothes, the hard brightness of her manners. Even James Henry frightened him. It *was* frightening to have a son so different from yourself—who was so slender, so clean-cut, who looked at you with such critical young eyes as though he thought it queer to have such a father. How could you tell a boy like James Henry, who had made a radio set with his own hands and understood things that Fritz Bernle wouldn't understand to his dying day, that you had a little German peasant woman for a mother? How could you explain to Annabel that you had been wrenched and torn by a home-sickness for a world that would make her laugh if she saw it—a world without cars or plumbing or movies or soda-fountains, where one lived face to face with a bleak necessity that these two would never know?

No—he couldn't. He couldn't bear the thought of

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their surprise—their irony—their thinly-disguised contempt. No hurry, anyway. No use disturbing folk for nothing. Anything might happen. She might not want to come. There was the quota. It might take years. And then perhaps—the thought skulked through his mind—it might be too late.

No—he wouldn't admit that he had thought that. But with his letter still in the letter-box he knew that he had done a darn-fool thing. One had to be hard-boiled in this life—as Annabel and James Henry were—and he had been soft and sentimental. And that was why they despised him in their heart of hearts and why he felt so lonely with them both.

So the months had slipped by. And sometimes in the rush of things he would forget the whole wretched business. And then letters would come full of Grandmother Bernle's progress, and he would sweat with shame and misery. He would be awake at nights, listening to Annabel's quiet breathing—thinking of the great ship that was bringing his crisis nearer with every minute, trying to gather courage to lay a hand on that shoulder turned against him and tell her the whole simple truth.

And in the end, with a heavy sigh, he, too, had turned over and fallen asleep.

Till the day came when an indifferent voice on the telephone had said, 'Yes—she docks to-morrow forenoon. The emigrants would be cleared through Ellis Island by six o'clock—those who were O.K. If he was a relative he could come along.'

And so the journey of one little old emigrant was over. And still Fritz Bernle had said nothing.

III

Grandmother Bernle couldn't have explained. It wouldn't have occurred to her to try. All her life she had been silent about things, and most of all when they hurt.

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She was just very quiet, as animals are quiet when they are ill and suffering. So nobody took much notice of her.

Anyhow, the emigrants were full of their own affairs. They were mostly young people starting out on a new life, and they had no use for old people whose adventures at best could be only short and without issue. It was different for the children. Everybody petted and made much of the children, because they were the future, and there was something moving in the thought of their innocence and of all they might become.

But Grandmother Bernle's story was already almost told, and it was obviously so simple that nobody had any interest in listening to it.

And then the emigrants were nearly all Lithuanians and Czecho-Slovakians, and spoke a strange, wild language, and regarded anyone who didn't with a dark hostility. The women in Grandmother Bernle's cabin pushed her about rather roughly, not because they were unkind, but because she was old and rather slow and took up so much room with her shawls and her petticoats. So she was glad when they went chattering and screaming at one another to the recreation saloon or to their meals.

Only once had Grandmother Bernle crept in after them—very timidly, not knowing what was expected of her. But the strange foods, the terrible fall and rise of the great ship, made her feel so ill that her neighbour—good-naturedly enough—had taken her up on to the deck and left her there on a pile of rope.

But she hadn't stayed. The sight of the vast tossing world in which nothing was at rest made it so hard to believe in God, or, at any rate, in a God that cared anything at all about Grandmother Bernle, that she had crept down the steep, heaving stairway and along the white passages, very slowly and painfully, till she found

her own place which for the first time was almost like home to her.

And there she stayed, not eating anything save some dry *Kuchen* that was left over from the paper packages, and sitting very quietly on the edge of her berth with her wrinkled hands clasped over a little crucifix and her eyes full of an enduring patience.

It was strange that nobody saw how like her eyes were to the eyes of the young children, or, in a way, how close she was to them in her nearness to the final mystery. But, in fact, they despised her a little because she was old and would never shoulder her way to wealth and power as they were all going to do. And because she stayed so quiet and undemanding they thought she wasn't right in the head.

It would indeed have gone very hardly with Grandmother Bernle if it hadn't been for the thought of Fritz and the young wife who was also her daughter. And most of all of the little Fritz who was to give her back her children to her.

Her thoughts hid themselves in those three. She would forget everything—the hunger and the cold and the terror of strange things—in the picture of them waiting for her. She couldn't think of them as strangers. They were her flesh and blood, and so of course it would be all right, and there was nothing for it but to be patient and to remember all the time that God was near to you everywhere, as the Burghermeister had said.

But at night, when she lay quiet and very small in her narrow berth, her petticoats folded neatly at the foot, and listening to the fierce beating of the ship's heart and the snoring of the Lithuanians, she would fall asleep and dream that she was in her dank little *Wohnstube* with the green, lush meadows of springtime shining through the window, and that the Burghermeister was there, too, talking to her, telling her the village gossip . . . of how

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Hans Stotz was quarrelling with his wife again and of how there was illness up there at Dorfmueller.

And once, in her dream, it was a Saturday, and all the white little faces were crowded in her doorway, and freckled little noses sniffed the warm fragrance of her *Honigkuchen*. And she said aloud as she had always done:

‘*Warte nur—warte nur, ihr Schlingels—*’

And the Lithuanians grumbled and said, ‘That old thing talks in her sleep. She is crazy. They ought not to allow such a thing—’ And turned over and snored louder than ever.

But Grandmother Bernle, who had wakened herself with her own voice, lay thinking about it all and remembering that now again she was to bake *Honigkuchen* for her own children.

Suddenly everyone went quite mad. It began the night before, like the stirring up of an ant-hill, with tremendous packings of boxes and parcels and running hither and thither and excited chattering.

Nobody slept at all, and everybody was dressed and about at daybreak. The Lithuanians and the Czecho-Slovakians filled the passages with bundles and babies and screaming small children, and it was with the greatest difficulty that the ship’s officers, who had an air of patient exasperation, herded them into the dining-saloon.

In all this confusion Grandmother was like an old bundle that no one wanted or knew what to do with. She would have liked to have stayed safe in her cabin, but she was afraid everyone would go without her, for she knew that she was of no importance to anyone save the people at home, who were so far off that it was as if they were in another world, and to Fritz and little Fritz and little Fritz’s mother who were waiting for her. She felt she had to get to them, at whatever cost, so she struggled out into the passage with her two boxes and made everyone very angry because, what with her many petticoats and

the fact that she was not so young any more, she could not help getting in everyone's way.

And to everyone Grandmother Bernle said 'Thank you' and 'If you please' in rapid succession, which made everyone more annoyed than ever.

At last the maelstrom in the dining-saloon poured out and carried Grandmother Bernle with it down congested passages and up companionways to the ship's side. It seemed almost as though they were all being swept into the sea, but when her turn came, squeezed breathless between a stout peasant woman and bearded gentleman in high boots, Grandmother Bernle found that they were to go down a ladder into another ship—so much smaller, so far beneath, that it seemed as though it must be crushed like an egg-shell. But presently they were all on board and drawing away swiftly over the smooth water.

And now, suddenly, everyone was quiet. Even the children stopped crying. All the assurance seemed to have gone out of everybody. Nobody talked any more of their grand relations or of what they were going to do.

It was as though, for a moment, they were overcome by a profound emotion of fear and wonder and inexplicable sorrow.

Everybody who could, crowded to the ship's side, from which they could see the mainland rising in magic towers and pinnacles out of the morning mists. The faces of the emigrants had lost all expression and were frozen stiff as though they were trying to hide even from themselves what they were thinking. They had become like school-children who have been very brave and boastful on the way to the new school, but who, at sight of the great building where they are to be strangers, become very small and frightened and think with longing of their homes. But none of them wanted to cry before the others.

Grandmother Bernle sat on her boxes apart from the

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rest. She was frightened, too—not on her own account, for she had never really thought of herself—but for everybody. She felt they were all very near the end of the world. It was like something she had heard the *Herr Pfarrer* preach about in church—something terrible and wonderful that might vanish at a gesture from God's wrathful hand.

If those great peaks, full of demonic unrest, had suddenly gone up in flame and fury or crumbled to ashes, dragging the world with them into a bottomless pit (as the *Herr Pfarrer* had described), Grandmother Bernle would not have been astonished. It couldn't be right to do such things—to build right into the face of God, as it were. It was like a defiance, which God Himself would surely punish.

But then Grandmother Bernle suddenly remembered that Fritz and little Fritz and little Fritz's mother might be living on the very highest peak of all, which meant that everything was all right and that she need not be afraid. Because Fritz had always been good. He had always gone to church regularly and had stayed at home to help when the other three had gone playing. He was her youngest and her dearest.

If Fritz chose to build high places like that, then it must be right to build them.

The little ship slid into a narrow dock with squat, red-faced buildings on either side. There were knots of people waiting, and Grandmother Bernle stood up stiffly with her heart beating all over her. But she was strong now. Everyone had to give way—even the stout Lithuanian peasant woman, who laughed, showing her strong white teeth. It was funny to see anyone so old and so excited.

So they let her come to the ship's side. And she leant over, looking everywhere. She had wonderful sight, but now her eyes were blurred with eagerness. Everyone

seemed to be Fritz—every man turning towards her was surely he. And then, before she had time to make certain, the emigrants surged forward, carrying Grandmother Bernle with them over the broad gangway.

She had no packages now. They were left behind, forgotten. She held back, peering into every face as it flowed past her, turning this way and that like a rudderless little old ship in a strong tide, calling 'Fritz—Fritz' in a thin small voice that nobody heard.

Any moment she might run right into his arms—might see his boyish freckled face smiling down into hers. For in her growing terror Grandmother Bernle had forgotten twenty years and the photograph of the stout middle-aged man with the high collar and the spotted tie. She was looking for her son.

But presently she was all alone except for a kindly-looking man in a blue uniform, who patted her on the shoulder and pointed the way the others had gone.

'Now then—you mustn't get lost, you know——'

And Grandmother Bernle said 'Thank you' with a dry throat and a deadly fear tugging at her heart. She knew now that Fritz hadn't come—that something dreadful had happened.

The vast red-faced building was full of people and the pervasive smell of disinfectants. It was like a hospital where everyone is kind but aloof because they are afraid to know too much about each other.

Everyone did what they liked with Grandmother Bernle. Unimaginable things. They looked at her hands and her tongue and into her eyes. They stripped her. Grandmother Bernle without her shawls was the merest handful of life. Even the doctor smiled. As to Grandmother Bernle, she would have died of shame had she not been half dead with fear.

Then after a long time they were all lined up before an official who was writing on papers nearly a yard wide.

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On one of the papers was Grandmother Bernle's name and age and almost all the story of her simple life—if you left out everything that matters. At least, there was nothing about the *Honigkuchen* that Grandmother Bernle had baked for the hungry children, or about how she had worked hard and never complained or done harm to anybody. For these are things that official papers never tell.

So the official was not interested in Grandmother Bernle at all. He looked at her passport and at Fritz's letters and photograph, which she had laid before him in a kind of dumb despair, as though perhaps he might recognise Fritz and tell her where she could find him. But he was not interested in Fritz either. He pushed over a thick book full of slips printed in every language in the world.

'Read that,' he said in German.

And now a terrible thing happened.

Grandmother Bernle had forgotten her letters.

All the time they had been doing what they liked with her she had been looking for Fritz. At every new face her heart had broken into a wild beating. And once when a child had called to its mother in her own tongue she had turned with a start of joy that had left her trembling and broken. With each disappointment something had died in her. The little fire of hope, at which she had warmed her hands during the long journey, had burnt lower and lower. And now she was so tired and cold——

'At the top of the page,' the official said patiently.

Grandmother Bernle looked where he pointed. She had to hold on to his desk to steady herself. There were the letters. But they meant nothing. They swam hither and thither like black fish in a muddy pond. She thought of the schoolmaster and how ashamed he would be. But that was nothing compared to the thought that Fritz—that everyone was dead. Or surely they would have come.

'Now then—let's begin, shall we?' the official suggested, writing hard.

'If you please——' And then suddenly she broke into German—stammering, speaking so softly that he could hardly hear. 'You see—I am waiting for my son——'

The official glanced over his glasses.

'What's that? What are you reading? Can't you read?'

Somehow all the humanity seemed to die out of her. She stood there dumb and docile, like a worn-out beast of burden awaiting the slaughterer's releasing blow. It wasn't in her either to explain or argue. All her life she had taken things as they came. One had to remember that they came from God.

'Can't you read?' the official repeated sharply.

It had been a long day. There had been more emigrants than usual and he was tired of emigrants. Here was just another of them—a decrepit peasant woman with dull eyes and trembling hands—too stupid even to answer. He turned to the man behind him.

'It's a darn shame. How they get away with it I don't know. The shipping folk over there must be as dumb as they are. Put her back for inquiries——'

Everyone saw that Grandmother Bernle was in trouble. They pushed her aside, throwing her looks of superiority and pity and satisfaction. They had been afraid too, but now they knew they were safe. In a little while they would be free and among their own friends.

For they were young and could read and write. They were the New World.

But Grandmother Bernle did not understand. She waited. She looked from one to the other piteously. And presently the kind-faced official came and took her gently by the arm and led her away.

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hadn't a heart between them. If they had they would have seen that he was terribly unhappy. They would have done something about it. Annabel would have sent James Henry from the room, and for once James Henry would have gone quietly, and then she would have put her arm over his shoulder, as she had used to do, and said, 'What is it, Fritz? What's the trouble?' And he would have leant his head against her and told her—told her every darn silly thing about himself.

But it hadn't happened like that.

At breakfast it had transpired that James Henry had given up the idea of building something that went up a mile and down a mile. He was going to own a Ball Club and buy up the best pitchers in the whole country and then let fly and wallop everything in sight. He might even take a hand himself. Yesterday he had hit a homer—what would have been a homer, at least, if the ball hadn't been obstructed by somebody's glass window. James Henry hoped there wouldn't be trouble. People were so darn particular about their silly old windows.

And Annabel was going to buy a new dress at Wanamakers. She was always buying new dresses. She thought of nothing else.

And neither of them had even noticed that he hadn't touched his breakfast. They didn't care. He was just the go-getter—the provider.

The visitors' room was white and bare save for the rows of benches. Little knots of strange-looking people were talking to each other anxiously in undertones. Fritz Bernle recognised her at once because she was all alone—seated in a far corner—a quiet, unprotesting bundle of grey shawl.

The official was kind and impersonal. Of course her case would come up before the Board. And then if the worst came to the worst one could appeal to Washington. But they were getting very strict. And they weren't

anxious to make exceptions of people who might become charges on the community.

It seemed, in fact, that America hadn't much use for an old lady who didn't know her letters.

And then with a nod the official went about his business.

Fritz Bernle walked on tip-toe. His smart new boots creaked. His heart beat thickly. But he did not know what he felt or was going to feel. He said 'Mutter!' timidly, like a little boy.

She stood up. She was trembling all over. He knew now. He had read somewhere that a man's whole life can come past him in a minute. It was like that—Annabel and James Henry and the tobacco store might never have happened.

It was yesterday he had run away. He remembered how he had hung about her whilst she prepared their breakfast, torn between his young relentless resolution and a desire to throw his arms about her and cry his heart out. In the end he had just slunk away without a word.

Only he could see that she hadn't been old at all. She must have been quite young. Now she was really old. . . .

Twenty years—

'Mutter!' he repeated.

Her clear blue eyes looked up at him vaguely. She put out her hand as though she were feeling her way to him through an obscuring mist, and he realised how much he too had changed. He saw himself as he had been on that last Sunday, young and slender and boyish in his native dress which he had never worn again. He ought to have felt proud. It was she who ought to have been abashed before the smart man-of-the-world that he had become. And instead, there was a wistful, seeking look in her lighted face, and a pang shot through him as though of sorrow because she would never find what she was looking for—

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Her hands touched him—fumbled over him. It was pitiful how little either of them knew what to do. Awkwardly, diffidently he put his arms about her. The unfamiliar roughness of her shawl went to his heart.

And then, suddenly, as though some sense keener than sight or touch had revealed him to her, she was clinging to him, flattening herself against him as a frightened bird flattens itself against the bars of its cage.

‘Fritz—Fritzchen—my little Fritz——’

He kissed her cheeks. They were like soft wrinkled leather. And he fancied the smell of the earth clung to her. Her voice in its soft Southern German came to him in a broken murmur.

‘*Muttergottes*—I have been so frightened—I thought you must be all dead—I have been so frightened——’

‘They wouldn’t let me come before,’ he explained. His native tongue came stiffly. He found he had forgotten words and made mistakes. It wasn’t strange, seeing how hard he had tried to forget. Only now it seemed ugly to have forgotten—as though he had tried to forget her. Well—perhaps he had.

He went on rapidly, garrulously: ‘You see, they’re very particular. They have to be. You can’t blame them. Anyhow, here I am. Tell me—did you have a good crossing? Did they treat you well?’

She seemed to overhear his empty questions.

‘Fritz—I am so tired. I have waited so long. Let us go home——’

‘Yes—yes, indeed. Presently. Let us talk first. One has so much to say.’

But he hadn’t. In clumsy silence he sat beside her on the hard bench. He took her hand in his. A clean old hand. But into every wrinkle the earth had worked itself indelibly. In the lines of her withered neck, drawn sharply as with an etcher’s knife, was the earth. A queer, unhappy laugh choked him. He had some notion of taking

her to some store and getting her fixed up. Now he saw how absurd he had been. She was what she was. Annabel and James Henry could stare their worst—think what they liked. She would not change for them. Well, it seemed she would not have to try.

Her hand fidgeted in his. She was looking anxiously, hungrily about her.

‘And the little wife—didn’t you bring her too?’

His little wife! That was funny, anyhow. Annabel—the smart city woman who didn’t even love him!

‘Well—you see, it was a long wait. And she isn’t strong. She had to go home.’

‘And the baby—the baby Fritz?’

Gosh! If James Henry heard her! James Henry who made radio sets and thought himself no end of a fellow. James Henry whom his own father didn’t dare kiss.

‘It’s this way, mother. He’s at school, you know. And they’re mighty particular. I wanted to bring him along, but they wouldn’t let him. Anyhow, it’s better. After twenty years—one wants to be alone——’

The mean little lies! They made him sweat. He went on hurriedly: ‘These twenty years—they must have been fearfully hard, mother.’

‘We managed. God took care of us.’

(God. Well—perhaps. Anyway, it wasn’t for him to be critical—her own son who had done nothing.)

‘I meant to send—I wanted to help. Somehow things sort of went on—I didn’t realise. And then the war came. We were pretty hard-pressed ourselves—my being German-born made it difficult. I had to be careful. Maybe you can’t understand. And I didn’t hear about them—about the boys—not till afterwards. Somehow—your letter—must have got held up somewhere.’

She did not seem to notice how he was stammering. Simply, as though she understood how he must want to

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know, she told him how it had all been. Hans had died on the Somme—Karl in a prisoners' hospital. Nobody knew about Oskar. Fifty of the village boys had gone and not returned.

Vaguely Fritz Bernle recalled them. Their names sounded in his memory like the notes of a half-forgotten song of his childhood. With Johann Flitch he had played most often—queer old Johann, who had stayed with him, talking in his attic bedroom that last night. He could see his earnest, freckled face gleaming white in the moonlight. Dead too. After terrible suffering most patiently endured.

How far away it all seemed. And yet how much part of himself—his real self. He looked down at his smart shoes—at his creased trousers. He was ashamed—but not as he had thought to be.

'They used to talk about you, Fritz. The last time Hans was home on leave he said, "I wonder what Fritz is doing now." How proud he would have been——'

'Mother!'

'*Denk nur!* A shop all of his own. And a diamond ring on his finger.'

A dark rage gathered in him—against Annabel and James Henry and the fat, shining car and the tobacco store, and against himself. He hadn't wanted her. And now it seemed he had no one else in the world. She was his mother—the only being who really cared. She was proud of him. She would have been proud if he had come to her in rags.

And now they wouldn't even let him take her home. For that matter he had no home. She would see that fast enough. He couldn't deceive her as he had deceived himself. He couldn't dazzle those old eyes with things. She would see he wasn't happy—that Annabel didn't love him—that James Henry was hard and smart, with as much heart as would go on a pin's head. She would see

how little it all mattered—the prosperous store and the shining car and the fine clothes.

An utter desolation overcame him. He didn't belong anywhere. He had no place, no language, no people.

'Mother—listen—I've boasted a lot. It isn't all as you think. There are things you won't like——'

She ran her hand over his sleeve—tentatively, a little humorously, as though the thought of its fine texture made her smile.

'S'ne feiner Herr!'

'Mother—don't—please don't!'

But she did not hear the misery of his protest. Her hand tightened. It seemed that she had remembered something and couldn't wait any more. She had begun to tremble again.

'Take me home, Fritz. I am so tired.'

'Mother—things will seem strange to you——'

'My son's home——!'

'Mother—you see—we've got to be patient. It isn't as easy as you think. They're very particular. They have laws—regulations.'

And now he had to tell her. He had to explain twice, for at first it was as though she were too frightened even to listen. Then she grew quiet. She seemed to grow smaller—to shrink altogether. But she did not tremble any more. She sat very still, with her hands folded on her voluminous lap. And when he had done she turned and looked at him sadly and steadily. And he knew that she knew everything. Her eyes were so shrewd for all their innocence. They knew that it wasn't only that she had forgotten her letters—they knew that he had forgotten her—that at heart he had grown rotten.

'Won't they let me see the little one, Fritz?'

'Yes—yes—of course. It will be all right, I promise——'

'And then they'll send me back—all that long way?'

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‘You see—we don’t know—we’ve got to hope for the best——’

He couldn’t go on. He couldn’t keep up the lies any more. There wasn’t anything to hope for. There was no home for her—nor for him either, whether she went or stayed. His grasp on her thin hand tightened convulsively. It was as though he were clinging to her.

‘*Mutter—liebste Mutter——*’

And then suddenly he began to cry. And Grandmother Bernle’s face quivered. She was trying to cry, too. But she couldn’t. For she was old and had forgotten how.

The official continued to be official. He was kind and cheerful and indifferent.

‘Too bad. Well, we get a lot of hard cases. What can we do about it? Can’t let the whole swarm in, you know.’

Fritz Bernle wasn’t listening. By this time Annabel and James Henry would be waiting supper for him. It was Saturday, and on Saturday they had fried chicken and ice-cream. They would hate to be kept waiting. And after that they’d want to go to a show. Oh, yes—they liked things done right, did Annabel and James Henry.

And she would be all alone—the little old woman who was his mother. Rough food to eat and a white bed among rows of beds—a sort of orphan-mother—nobody caring. He saw her as she had stood in the big room where he had left her—so small, so forlorn and lost in all that strangeness. And she had tried to smile. It had broken him all up.

He made a queer, choking sound.

‘I’d like to get drunk,’ he said wildly. ‘Dead drunk. Like hell I would——’

‘You can’t,’ said the official severely. ‘It’s against the law.’

But on second thoughts he winked.

Annabel was looking after the store whilst the assistant went to lunch. Even though everything was finished she had a sense of duty. And, besides, she was fond of the store. She was proud of it and, though it was the last thing she would have admitted, she felt tenderly towards it.

Because it was there she had gone to buy her father a birthday present of cigars fourteen years ago, and a blond, shy young salesman, who spoke English with an accent that made her laugh, had advised her that Coronas were the best.

And so Annabel had fallen deeply, violently in love.

However, all that was over now. Annabel's box waited packed in the hall upstairs and James Henry was hanging about in his best Sunday clothes, looking gloomy and disapproving. Because he didn't want to go to Nyack, and he didn't believe for a moment all that stuff about Grandmother wanting them to stay awhile. He knew better. At his time of life you couldn't pull the wool over his eyes that way.

For a long time he had been fully aware that things weren't right between Pop and Mom, and he didn't like it. He had no use for all this quarrelling and divorce business. When he married it would be different, and his kids were going to sit up and take notice. He wouldn't be like Pop. And he certainly wouldn't put up with the ways of Annabel—let alone James Henry. You could put your shirt on that.

Meantime it was very awkward that at the age of ten you still had to do what you were told.

As for Annabel, she told herself, as she tried to calculate the cost of five packets of Lucky Strikes, that there was a limit to what any woman would endure. It wasn't so much his ringing up the night before and telling her in a

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queer, violent voice that he wasn't coming home and refusing her even a conventional lie as explanation. It was their whole life together.

At least, not the whole. There were those first years. She would never forget them. It was for their sake she had held out so long, hoping against hope that some miracle would bring Fritz back to her. Because he had gone. The man she had married—the shy, gentle, loving boy had been swallowed up by a commonplace, vulgar fellow who boasted and swaggered and cared for nothing on earth but getting ahead and making money and rolling round in his swell car.

He didn't even care for her. But he was proud of her because of her looks and because she knew how to doll up in the smart clothes he was always giving her. And James Henry, when he'd been to college, was going to make him prouder still.

Annabel didn't know when it had all happened. She supposed it had been gradual, but she knew very clearly when she had found it out. It had been one morning just after America had gone into the war. Fritz had been reading out the news and making comments in a loud, aggressive voice. He had just said 'Nothing's bad enough for the swine', when she had looked up, and suddenly she had been ashamed—terribly, sickeningly ashamed—and he had seen the shame in her eyes.

After that nothing had been right. He had seemed to take a delight in saying the things that hurt and humiliated her. Once she had been on the point of saying 'It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest', but had stopped herself in time. He wouldn't have understood. And she had gone on, putting a good face on things.

It would have been easier if she hadn't loved him—it would have been easier if it hadn't been for James Henry. Then she would have gone away.

'I guess you're feeling fine this morning,' her customer

remarked good-humouredly. 'You've given me ten cents too much.'

There was another customer in the shop. He wore a dark-blue uniform and a more serious expression than seemed justified by the business of purchasing cigarettes. For an anxious moment Annabel suspected him of being a policeman looking for her husband. After last night nothing would have surprised her. And even when she saw that he wasn't a policeman, she braced herself as he leant confidentially across the counter.

'Mr. Bernle home, ma'am?'

'No—he's away. If there's a message——'

'Perhaps it's Mrs. Bernle, ma'am?'

'Yes—I'm Mrs. Bernle.'

'Well—if I could have a word with you it would do. It's urgent. Maybe we could get hold of Mr. Bernle——'

There was nobody in the store but James Henry, who was under the counter wrapped in the comic section of the Supplement, and nobody noticed him.

'You can go ahead,' Annabel said coldly.

'It's about the old lady,' he explained.

'About what old lady?'

'Well—she's disappeared.'

Annabel gathered her thoughts together with an effort.

'I guess you've got hold of the wrong address,' she said. 'There isn't any old lady about here.'

'Well, that's what we wanted to make sure of. It was just a chance—a hope, you might say. Not that we thought much of it. Such a thing has never happened, and, rightly speaking, can't happen. You'd need to swim to get off the Island, and then some.'

He pushed his official cap to the back of his head and mopped himself. 'Gee—it's a bad business.'

'I don't understand a word you're saying,' Annabel declared with nervous irritability.

'Well, ma'am, it's plain enough, worse luck. Looks to

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me plain enough, anyhow. Must have done away with herself. Poor soul—she was all skeery, and you can't blame her. You think of it—sixty-five and coming all that way, and then find you've got to clear back again, maybe. I had my own mother come over, and I know what she felt like. Ready to die of fright, she told me. And she could speak English—being civilised like we are. Not that this old lady wasn't civilised, but it seems they didn't run to education where she came from——'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Annabel insisted with increasing exasperation.

The official regarded her reproachfully.

'Well—see here—I'm trying to break it to you gentle, ma'am. It's my opinion she got out of the building somehow and walked into the water. There isn't any other explanation as I sees it. Anyway, she's gone.'

'Who's gone?'

'Mr. Bernle's mother, ma'am. Ain't I telling you——'

Annabel considered him for a moment in silence. It had been on the tip of her tongue to say 'Mr. Bernle hasn't got a mother,' but then suddenly she had remembered. Long ago in the early days when they had been happy he had spoken of her. And they had agreed that when things were easier they'd write. Then they had forgotten. Their lives had been so full—so strenuous. And afterwards, when the war came, the subject had been barred between them. She had been too ashamed of his shame. And now——

'You're an emigration officer?' she asked quietly. 'Is that it?'

'Sure. That's what I am.' He was mildly indignant. 'What you take me for—the ice man?'

'Well, I wasn't expecting you. I didn't know. My husband never told me——'

'Never told you she was coming?'

'No.'

I. A. R. WYLIE

The official scratched his head.

'Maybe he meant it for a surprise, ma'am.'

'Maybe he did.'

'Well—I'm sorry. If Mr. Bernle had been here—I'd have done different.'

'Mr. Bernle didn't come home last night.'

There was another silence. The officer's face had grown very red.

'Maybe he didn't want to worry you.'

'Maybe.'

'I guess that's the way of it. You see, she hadn't got by the reading test, and they were holding her for investigation. And he'd had to explain to her. I guess it came pretty hard—having to leave her there—such an old lady and one's own mother—after all those years. I saw him afterwards, and he looked badly—'most as though he'd been crying. And when a grown man cries it hurts some—believe me.'

'Yes,' Annabel agreed, but as though she weren't really listening.

'And after all—there wasn't no need. She'd have had another chance. There was a schoolmaster guy in her village who had written; said she was all right if she took things easy and weren't skeered. It isn't as though we were hard on folks. But we have to watch our step or we get it in the neck. Mostly we get that anyway.'

'You mean she's gone?'

'Vanished. Clean off the face of the earth. There was a big crowd going across this morning, and when we came to check up—well, she just wasn't there. They figured that if she'd got ashore somehow she might get along to you, and they sent me to investigate. Seemed safer than 'phoning. She'd got your address written all over her.'

'Well—she isn't here.'

The officer sighed ruefully.

'It's a police job, then. And you know what that means.'

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Headliners in all the papers—"Emigrant's Suicide laid to Brutal Emigration Authorities". And half of us'll lose our jobs. Whatever these yer emigrants do we lose our jobs. It's the one sure thing.'

'If she or my husband come along, I'll telephone,' Annabel said.

'Thank you, ma'am. You couldn't mistake her. A nice little old lady, all shawls and petticoats like they seem to wear them over there. Gosh, I wish I knew she were safe. She'd got money on her, too—and not a word of English. Anyone could get hold of her. And New York not being a nest of angels—— Well—if she comes along——'

'I'll take care of her.'

'And tell her not to be skeered. It'll be all right. We aren't hard on folk——'

'I'll tell her.'

'Not that she'll understand——'

'I'll make her understand,' said Annabel composedly.

Long after he had gone she stood motionless at her counter. For all her outward calm she didn't seem able to think. She couldn't visualise the little old lady in the shawls and petticoats. Not yet. She couldn't get further than the idea of Fritz crying. The man he had become wouldn't cry. Wouldn't care. That meant there was a mistake somewhere. There was something she did not understand—perhaps had never understood. She had been so sure—so implacably sure in her judgment. And all the time he had been acting in secret, thinking his own thoughts, perhaps, in his own way, suffering.

Why hadn't he come home?

He hadn't wanted to. In the critical moment of his life he had kept away from her. That meant that somewhere she had failed him too.

How queer and rough his voice had sounded.

Fritz crying for his mother!

It shook her universe. It shook her vision of herself. It

might be that she didn't know anything at all. It might be that there were things even in her own son that she didn't know.

She called him. To her dismay she heard her voice tremble.

'Sonny—I guess we won't be going to Nyack after all.'

No answer.

'James Henry!' Annabel demanded more firmly.

She looked under the counter. But where he had been was nothing but the fragments of Mutt and Jeff. James Henry, too, had gone his way.

VI

The truth was, of course, that nobody knew much about James Henry, not even James Henry himself. If you had asked him what his chief ambition was in life he would have said to be the best pitcher the Giants had ever owned. Or to be an engine driver. Or a millionaire. Or a drug-store assistant, with free access to the ice-cream department. Just as the mood had him. All these ambitions being considered proper and legitimate by his particular 'Bunch'.

Never for a moment would he have admitted the truth—the truth being that the real and secret longing of his heart was to Rescue Somebody. Dangerously, sometimes at the cost of his life—though not often, on account of the difficulties of enjoying one's own funeral—but always with the loss of a limb or with a bullet through the shoulder. Sufferings most gallantly endured. The Judge invariably complimented him when he appeared as witness against the several bandits he had roped up single-handed, and there were cheers in court.

Mostly it was a hold-up gang. But once or twice James Henry had rescued a Lady-in-Distress—rather shyly and uncertainly, being less sure of his ground and hampered by conflicting emotions with regard to the Sex.

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On the whole he thought very little of women—except his mother, who was exceptional—but he had an uneasy feeling that they were biding their time and it would be wiser to suspend judgment. Anyway, they were obviously intended by nature to be rescued, and though showing a lamentable tendency to take care of themselves, one had to make the best of them.

James Henry, true to type, invariably rescued Blondes. Youthful Blondes at that. But he was not bigoted, and after all a Grandmother was better than nothing.

The great feature of James Henry's methods was swiftness of Action. When you had to deal with Bad Men and Lost Grandmothers it was of no use sitting round talking about it. You had to Act. For that reason James Henry did not stop to consult his mother, whom he knew from experience to be an Impediment. With his weekly quarter in one pocket and a large two-bladed knife in the other he set out quietly and unobtrusively, and was at his favourite drug store, three blocks down, before Annabel even remembered his existence.

A Pineapple Temptation may seem an unusual stirrup-cup for a Knight-Errant-on-the-Rescue, but after all James Henry knew his own temperament. As he licked his spoon to a deceptive brightness he also put the final touches to his campaign. The great thing was to go straight to the scene of the crime. Emigrants, he had heard, landed at the Battery. Very well—he would go to the Battery, and obtain clues. The subway would take him there, and fortunately he was still five cents to the good.

Afterwards—well, on an adventure like that it was of no use looking too far ahead.

On the subway James Henry thought about his father. The idea of his father crying bothered him. It was true that if one was a man it hurt to cry. It made one feel sick. And sometimes one *was* sick. Anyhow, James Henry had

never thought of his father in that connection. His father had always seemed a hard-boiled sort of fellow who didn't want any nonsense from anybody. But perhaps there were things about the Old Boy one didn't know. Undreamed-of possibilities. Crying for his mother, for instance. James Henry understood that, having done it himself.

Perhaps Pop hadn't had a square deal. Perhaps Mom herself didn't treat him right. After all, the Old Boy wasn't bad. Generous. Always giving you things in a gruff sort of way as though he dared you to imagine that he cared whether you thanked him or not. Perhaps at bottom he'd kinda wanted you to kiss him. And why shouldn't one, anyway? It wasn't the sort of thing one needed to shout from the housetops.

Well, if he had been unkind he was going to make up for it now. If James Henry's father wanted his mother he should have her. James Henry would see to that.

Always supposing she was still alive.

James Henry thought she was. He didn't set much stock on the suicide theory. That was just the sort of bluff the cops always put up when somebody had put it over them. And it wasn't probable that hold-up men would worry with an old woman. More likely she'd just wander round till somebody found her.

That somebody was going to be James Henry himself.

It was three o'clock and a cold and windy afternoon when he arrived, after inquiries, at the Battery landing-place. By this time his plans were mature. Having inspected the ground carefully and found nothing of a suspicious nature, he addressed himself to the nearest policeman.

'Say—you don't happen to have seen an old lady round here—a li'le old lady in a lot of shawls and petticoats?'

The officer considered him.

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'Sure. Dozens of 'em. Which one have you lost, sonny?'

'I'm looking for my grandmother,' explained James Henry.

'Well—I guess I have. About five minutes ago—going north. Better ask my mate farther along—on point. Maybe he can tell you. Not lost yourself by any chance, have you?'

'I guess not,' said James Henry with frigid scorn.

But it seemed that a great many people had seen his grandmother. They were sure of it. It was unfortunate that she was always going in different directions, and that though, according to their account, she had just gone round the corner, James Henry, running his hardest, could never catch up with her. And the Pineapple Temptation was failing.

Like other temptations the pineapple variety are notoriously treacherous. They begin well and end badly. For long and arduous enterprise 'hot dogs' are better.

At the thought of 'hot dogs' James Henry faltered. At six o'clock he was wont to have his supper. By which token he could only suppose that it was well past midnight. And hurrying crowds jostled him, and doubtful characters trailed him down dark and lonely streets. Still, if one was a Sleuth one had to be patient. One didn't have to mind if it began to rain, or if one didn't know any more where one was, or if one's feet ached, or if one had a lump in one's throat and a hollow lower down.

One stuck it.

One only hoped one wouldn't cry, too.

VII

There are things one can only do if one doesn't know how to do them. If Grandmother Bernle had understood that it was quite impossible for an unauthorised emigrant to walk out of the red-faced building and get on board the

ferry and land on the other side—all under the noses of the officials—she couldn't have done it.

But Grandmother Bernle didn't understand.

After Fritz had gone she had sat alone in the vast recreation room and waited. Every now and again a man would appear on the raised platform and shout out something, and the knots of chattering emigrants would run up to him in a wild state of excitement. But either he was speaking in a foreign language or Grandmother Bernle, who wasn't very quick, arrived too late to hear what he was saying.

After a while she saw that everyone had forgotten her.

And then the long night, awake, in the rows of white beds——

And to-morrow, perhaps, they would send her back——

No—that couldn't be. She was too old. She had borne it all—the weary days in the suffocating train, and the terror of the great seas, and the strangeness and the loneliness, because she had been going home to her son and her son's wife and the little Fritz. There had been a sort of glory over all the hardship.

But to go back would be different. The little house where she had lived her life would be gone for her. There would be no home or place for her any more. No triumphal arches. Everyone who had been so kind would look sad and reproachful. They would say, 'They have sent her back because she is too old and stupid.' Even the *Herr Burghermeister* would be sorry, and the schoolmaster would think how she had disgraced him.

She had disgraced everyone.

But they would send her back all the same. And somewhere on these terrible grey seas she would die. Her heart would break.

And yet she *could* read. If only she hadn't been so tired and frightened. If only Fritz had been there to give her courage.

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But it was as the *Herr Burghermeister* had said. He had been gone too long. You couldn't expect to find a son who had been gone twenty years. Only at the last moment, when he had begun to cry, she had recognised him. Under the fine gentleman had been the child—the little Fritz—her baby.

Little Fritz. If only she could have seen him. That would make up for everything. But they would never let him come. They wouldn't want him to know that he had a grandmother who was so poor and ignorant. Because she understood quite well how it was. Her son had become a fine gentleman and his wife would be a fine lady. And they would be ashamed.

And yet she knew somehow that the little Fritz himself wouldn't be ashamed at all. He wouldn't mind about her not knowing how to read. He would like her *Honigkuchen* just as his father had done. They would learn to talk to each other over the heads of the fine, grown-up people. At the very end she would find her lost babies in him.

From where she sat she could see across the water to the tall towers where he lived.

They would send her home.

A queer, wild tumult gathered in Grandmother Bernle's heart. It was frightening. She didn't know herself. She who had always been so docile and so patient had come to a place in life where she had to fight—where she couldn't be docile and patient any more.

A crowd of released emigrants with bag and baggage were moving along the passage. Grandmother Bernle joined them. The smartest official couldn't have known what a desperate law-breaker was passing under his nose. She was so mouse-like.

Besides, old ladies aren't law-breakers. They do as they are told.

Besides, what was happening had never happened before, and couldn't happen.

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So nobody noticed her at all.

She realised that she mustn't seem strange. She mustn't look as though she were frightened. She must walk quickly and firmly as though she knew quite well where she was going.

It was very difficult, because she was trembling all over, and every minute she expected one of the terrible buildings to fall on her. She could feel their invisible crests swaying in the icy, rain-soaked wind that blew down the narrow streets and wrapped her petticoats so tightly about her that she could hardly move, and made wings of her shawls. People smiled at her as they passed. But Grandmother Bernle didn't know they even saw her. It seemed to her that everybody was rushing along in a frantic hurry as though they were afraid that if they weren't very quick they would be overtaken and destroyed, and that if she were to stumble and fall down they would ride over her without even knowing.

So she was very careful. But indeed she was in God's hands. In such a place only God could protect you.

Overhead were grim, black girders. From minute to minute they shook and chattered in the teeth of a steel wind that broke over them with a sound of thunder. The streets were full of mad, panic-stricken vehicles. Yet every now and again some invisible power checked them and they stood at the corners of the streets, fretting and champing and making little leaps at Grandmother Bernle as she faltered in front of them.

And once, when she wasn't quick enough, the invisible power, perhaps out of malice, perhaps because it neither knew or cared, let go its hold, and the whole horde broke loose, so that if it hadn't been for a blue-uniformed policeman Grandmother Bernle might never have gone any further.

The policeman was good-natured but reproachful.

'Better watch your step, mother. You leave that sort

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of thing to the youngsters.'

'If you please,' said Grandmother Bernle breathlessly. And then, because he smiled at her, she showed him the label on which Fritz Bernle's address was written. Whereupon the policeman looked very grave and jerked his thumb over his shoulder and talked at great length and very slowly.

In effect he said, 'You keep on the way you're going and you'll be there by midnight. Better take the subway.'

And he showed her where the subway was, but Grandmother Bernle had no idea what you did with subways. She hadn't understood anything but the jerk of the thumb, so she said 'Thank you' and went on. She knew by the way he had pointed that she would be home soon.

But he had given her courage. And every now and again she would stop someone who seemed less in a hurry than the rest and show him her label and say 'If you please', with her best accent. And some of them, like the policeman, talked a great deal and made gestures, at which Grandmother nodded earnestly, and some of them who couldn't speak English frowned and shook their heads, and some of them walked a little way with her to get her back to the right road.

And to everything they said Grandmother Bernle answered 'Thank you', but more and more faintly as time went on.

Time went on a long way. It began to rain. It grew dank. And though myriads of fantastic dancing lights sprang up they only made the night more terrible. In the darkness of the village street Grandmother had never been afraid. But she was afraid now. Faces that looked wolfish flowed under the lamp-lights. The houses no longer towered to heaven. They had become squat and drab, as though they were too worried and busy to grow to their full height. The crowds densened.

And now when Grandmother Bernle tried to show her

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label nobody listened. They pressed on, white and intent, driven by some fury of unrest and desire.

If Grandmother Bernle had only known it, they, too, were fighting their way home.

Sometimes she crept into a doorway just to get her breath. Sometimes she thought a policeman looked at her curiously, and then she hurried on faster than ever. For before they sent her back she must find her children.

All her ebbing life had narrowed to that point.

Some of the stores were still open. Through their doors came rich smells, and their bright windows seemed to glow with food. Grandmother Bernle was so hungry she dared not look at them. She was so tired that she dared not stand still lest she should fall. Fortunately she had borne more than she could bear all her life, so that she didn't know that it was almost all over with her.

The rain came down in straight, grey lines. It swept the streets clear of all but the taxis that flashed about like giddy fireflies and a few belated pedestrians who pressed homewards with their umbrellas lowered against the wind. They came charging down on Grandmother Bernle, but she stepped meekly aside and they never saw her. And now she was moving very slowly, dragging her feet.

She was beginning to understand. She would never get there. Her knees were giving way under her. Her heart was failing. She could feel it breaking in her breast. Presently she would lie down and die like the worn-out horses.

Then Grandmother Bernle remembered clearly what the Burghermeister had said and, leaning against a wall, commended her soul to God.

Somebody was crying.

She heard the sound distinctly above the splash of the rain and the rush of the wind and the thick beating of her heart. It was a sound like a bugle call. All her life she

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had answered to it, putting down her work, forgetting her own weariness.

A child crying.

She looked about her. It was just ahead—a little boy walking very slowly, as though he, too, couldn't walk much more. His head was bent, and with the knuckles of one hand he was trying to rub away the mingled tears and rain. But he was snuffling drearily as though he didn't care any more who heard him.

Grandmother Bernle hurried her faltering step.

'Aber sagmal—was ist dann, Kleinche?'

She forgot he could not understand.

He turned. Under the street lamp they considered each other. Not for thirty years had Grandmother Bernle seen a boy's face so dirty and so doleful. Yet as his sullen, swollen eyes under the once-jaunty cap travelled over her and came to rest on the label pinned to her shawl their expression changed—lit up with a glee and triumph that made her heart stand still with memory.

'Gee—if it ain't my grandma!' He seized her hand in his. He wasn't crying now. Instead he had become in a moment manly and commanding.

'Gosh—I've been looking for you all day. You gotta come along with me. You gotta come home.'

And Grandmother Bernle knew then that it was little Fritz. But she didn't know until afterwards that, because he had found her, therefore she belonged to him for ever.

VIII

It was queer how thirty-six hours had lifted ten years from him. He looked as he had done when James Henry had been born—unwashed, unshaved, red-eyed, distraught—as though he had been drinking for days on end—and yet somehow cleansed, not sleek or prosperous any more—but the real man. And somehow lovable.

At least Annabel, sewing quietly at her work-table, thought so.

He stood facing her, his Stetson clenched in his grimy hands, his coat-collar turned up about his ears. A disgraceful spectacle. And yet young and boyish and pathetic.

Annabel, after one swift, comprehensive glance, did not look at him again.

'Of course you know,' he said. 'They told me they'd been up here. Otherwise you might have thought I'd been on the jag.'

'I just hope none of your customers saw you coming up,' Annabel observed irrelevantly. 'I know what they'd think. Your collar looks like you'd been digging coal——'

'She's gone,' he said. 'I've been up all night with the police—picking up one clue after another. But it all led to nothing. It was just a chance; they said themselves she couldn't have got ashore. Not without their knowing. It's not possible.'

'Oh,' said Annabel, biting her cotton.

'And anyway,' he continued wildly, 'where could she have gone? She had nowhere to go. Not a darned place. She knew. We was too smart for her sort. We'd be ashamed. Her son was too fine a fellow—she saw what he was. Sure—she did. And it broke her heart. I—I saw it break.'

'You'd better shut the door,' Annabel advised. 'Folks might think you'd murdered someone.'

He nodded.

'That's how I feel. I guess that's what I've done. Sure enough. She'd come all that way, Annabel, and I hadn't a thing for her—not so much as a real kind word. Her own son. And she just made an end. Seems to me I've kinda killed myself, too.'

'I don't understand,' Annabel said. 'Say it slowly. I'm not clever.'

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He looked at her sternly and yet with a sort of piteous appeal.

'No—maybe you won't understand. I wouldn't have—two days ago. I would have said I was no end of a fellow who'd pulled himself up by his boot-straps and had gotten a dandy wife and a cute kid and a grand car and a bang-up business of his own. I wouldn't have worried how things looked inside. But I know now. I'm a poor skunk, Annabel, a mean, cowardly, bootlicking cur. I've been looking at myself all night, and it's made me sick.'

Annabel hunted round for her scissors.

'You'll be all right after a bath and a shave,' she said.

'Don't!' He brought his fist down on the table. 'Don't—don't laugh at me. You can despise me all you want. You always haf. Don't I know it? I wasn't good enough for you—a peasant-boy—a square-head that had squirmed its way into a white collar. And me—trying to live up to you—trying to make you forget——'

'Forget what?' she asked innocently.

'What I was.'

'What I'd married,' she murmured.

But he didn't hear.

'Well—that's how I killed myself all right. I wasn't a bad kid till I started wearing a diamond on my finger—swaggering and blowing and lying—making out I was something I wasn't—throwing mud on my people so's to make you think better of me. Because I was mad about you—mad for you to care, too——'

'And now I guess that's all over——'

'It's over.' He nodded heavily. 'I'm through. I'm what I am. I'm her son. And I'll tell you what she is. She's a little old German woman that can't read nor write—that's worked all her life in the fields and's gotten the soil in her very skin. I guess she's never driven in a car nor seen a movie nor heard a radio. She don't know

nothing of our ways—she wouldn't care nothing. But she's good. She worked for us—me and my brothers, who were Hun soldiers, Annabel, and died fighting. She loves the place she comes from. She'd never go back on it as I've done—she only left it because I sent for her——'

'Tell me something,' Annabel interrupted. 'Why did you send for her?'

He waited a moment. He seemed to be gathering all his strength to speak with a steady voice.

'Because I was homesick and lonesome. I—I hadn't no one. I'd gotten to understand you didn't care—I wanted her.'

'Well—you might have told me.'

'Yes—I might have. But afterwards I was ashamed. I thought how you'd feel—how you'd think. And I loved you so—I couldn't bear it. I kept putting it off and putting it off——' He hesitated, and then went on slowly, painfully: 'I used to think you'd kinda got no heart, Annabel. But I guess it's not that. I guess it's been sort of hard on you too. You didn't know—none of us knew about the war—— You couldn't understand what it was like—with a bit of your roots here and a bit of your roots there—trying to feel and think the way you ought—an'—an'—breaking your—your head over it all——'

His eyes were red with sleeplessness and tears. She was very careful not to look at him.

'I guess there's been a kinda mistake all round, Fritz.'

'Well—it's finished now——'

'What are you going to do?'

'If—if she's dead I don't know. Seems to me I couldn't live with myself. If she's alive I'm going home with her. I'm going back to what I was. That way you'll—you'll be quit of both of us. You can haf the store. You're smarter at the job than I am. I—I guess it's about all I've given you——'

He tottered and sat down, huddling himself at the table,

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with his head buried in his arms. Annabel put down her work. It was as though she had been waiting. She got up. And then a strange, incredible thing happened. She put her arms about him and kissed him gently on the nape of his bowed neck.

‘You’re all het up, honey. What you want is a good breakfast——’

He heard her go across the room. A warm aroma, as touching, as stirring to his memory as an old tune, came to him. He looked up. Framed in the kitchen doorway he saw James Henry perched on a table and Grandmother Bernle baking *Honigkuchen*.

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